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## **‘SLOVAKS ARE AN EMPATHETIC NATION STANDING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY IN DIFFICULT TIMES’**

– *Mr Ambassador, above all, we would like to express our gratitude to Slovakia for the comprehensive military, humanitarian, economic, and political support it has rendered to Ukraine since the first days of the full-scale invasion. We would like it if Ukrainians knew more about aspects of the aid Slovakia gives to Ukraine, so what do you personally consider to be the most important in this context?*

– Since 24 February 2022, Slovakia has been helping and supporting Ukraine. We are in 5<sup>th</sup> place in the ranking of countries that provide aid per capita. Our assistance is wide-ranging and includes humanitarian, military and political fields.

I am especially proud of the help that my compatriots have provided directly to Ukrainian refugees who were forced to leave their homes. It confirmed that Slovaks are an empathetic nation standing on the right side of history in difficult times. It is also worth mentioning the political support that Slovakia has provided to Ukraine since 2014. This is one of the important factors that has been positively influencing the Euro-Atlantic integration agenda.

– *You are one of the few foreign diplomats who remained in Kyiv since 24 February and was here shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukrainian citizens. We highly appreciate that. For a while before the full-scale invasion, most embassies encouraged their nationals to leave the territory of Ukraine. Could you recollect your actions and feelings during that disturbing period and also on the actual 24 February?*

– The news of the Russian invasion shocked me, as it probably did everyone else. We could feel the tension in the last days before 24 February, but I still did not believe Russia would attack on a full scale. We very quickly returned to reality and concentrated on what was our priority task: ensuring the safety of Slovak citizens. First, we gathered them in the embassy, and then evacuated them. I left Kyiv together with 3 other colleagues only after the last Slovak citizen left the country. And in that situation, the Slovak Embassy relocated for a short time to Uzhhorod. Those were difficult times; we had no experience of being in a combat zone. I mainly remember the shelling of Kyiv and sporadic shooting in the city itself. It was difficult; news about the progress of Russian troops and casualties began to appear. We learned about the successful defence only later.

– *In March 2023, you visited some of the liberated settlements of the Kherson region and saw the aftermath of the ‘Russian world’ with your own eyes. What made the strongest impression on you during that visit? Did you meet the local residents?*

– I was surprised by the scale of destruction by the Russian soldiers. There was no way to justify that. We saw destroyed schools, hospitals, and residential buildings. It was clear that these were not military targets but an attempt to cause the Ukrainians as much damage as possible. On the contrary, I was positively surprised by the professionalism and heroism of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the entire nation. The determination to fight, defend and liberate your country in the face of a strong enemy.

– *You actively interact with the communities of different Ukrainian cities. Could you tell us about the important initiatives and projects for aiding the local population that you supported or organised during the war? What challenges or obstacles arise during cooperation with the communities, and how do you overcome them?*

– Slovakia has delivered more than 900 tons of relief material to Ukraine: medical supplies, food supplies, protective equipment, beds, sleeping bags, tents, blankets, clothes and footwear, face masks, respirators, firefighting equipment, IT equipment and servers, mobile phones, hygiene items, generators, heaters, first aid kits etc. The official humanitarian aid we have provided for Ukraine since the escalation of the conflict amounts to more than EUR 11.2 million. The overall amount of Slovak development assistance to Ukraine has reached almost EUR 30 million since 2014. Slovakia currently ranks 28<sup>th</sup> place in the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. In addition to material and financial assistance, since 2022, Slovakia has launched 7 humanitarian projects with a total value of almost EUR 2.3 million, thanks to which urgent needs are provided to people in Ukraine through the distribution of food and hygiene packages, vouchers for the purchase of basic necessities, the provision of health care and psychosocial support, as well as equipment for temporary shelters for internally displaced persons and winterization material.

Since the Russian full-scale invasion, Slovakia has been implementing projects in various regions of Ukraine (from Zakarpattia to Dnipropetrovsk regions). Slovakia provides aid through a variety of programs. We built a shelter for victims of sexual violence during the war; we provided financial contributions to purchase kitchen equipment for a rehabilitation centre for displaced persons, socially disadvantaged persons and discharged soldiers and their families. We provide a financial contribution for buying the necessary equipment for the rehabilitation centre for foothold (amputation or trauma) for wounded internally displaced persons, discharged servicemen, and civilians in need. We also provided small grants for development cooperation projects. When the Kakhovka dam was destroyed, Slovakia provided material assistance in the form of pumps, hoses, blankets, disposable chemical suits and food. There is a financial contri-

bution from Slovakia – 200 thousand euros for the construction of water supply for the State Agency for Reconstruction and Development of Infrastructure of Ukraine.

– *The last Visegrád Group meeting took place almost one year ago. All states-parties except Hungary affirmed their readiness to continue rendering military support to Ukraine. Its declared main areas included the repair of military equipment and the rehabilitation of Ukrainian soldiers. What has been achieved in these areas since, and what problems have emerged in the process of providing Ukraine with military aid?*

– I can speak only on behalf of Slovakia here. My country was among those that provided massive military aid very soon after Russia started the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine. I will not go into details, but it is worth hundreds of millions of euros. Almost all Ukrainians know that we provided, among other things, the anti-aircraft system S-300, Mig-29 jets, and ammunition. We are providing our self-propelled howitzers Zuzana on a commercial basis – 2 machines were handed over to the Ukrainian side at the end of July. We also provided tens of Infantry Fighting Vehicles and Božena world-class demining systems. Joint production of armaments and ammunition is going on. We are actively involved in the training of Ukrainian soldiers in Slovakia. We are helping Ukraine as much as we can. The main challenge is that one and half years ago, Slovakia and I can say other countries supporting Ukraine nowadays did not believe that RU could start a full-scale war in Europe from one day to another. We did not have the amount of weapons or ammunition we had when the Cold War ended 30 years ago. I want to say that we did not want to start the war, unlike what RU propaganda sometimes claims.

– *Many European countries have offered Ukraine assistance in post-war reconstruction. Slovakia has repeatedly confirmed the willingness of numerous Slovak businesses to partake in those processes. Are there any projects for reconstructing specific Ukrainian cities or regions under consideration?*

– Yes, Slovakia wants to assist in the post-war reconstruction. Discussions are going on in Bratislava about these issues. I visited several regions of Ukraine in order to find out more about the needs and challenges. I do not want to be too specific since, first and foremost, it is an issue for Slovak business subjects, but our diplomatic service will be helpful in the process.

– *Before the full-scale invasion, almost a hundred Slovak companies operated on the Ukrainian market. Do you know how many of them operate today and what areas they are involved in?*

– I do not have up-to-date information. Some companies that worked on the territories that got under temporary Russian occupation had to relocate or stop their activity. Others that are located close to the frontline had to limit their work. I am also informed that our businesses had to deal with the problems

with electricity supplies caused by the Russian bombings. Anyway, there is a lot of economic activity between our countries. Of course, there is space for deepening and widening the cooperation. If you ask which areas our companies are involved in, I can mention the oil and gas industry and gas transit. Slovakia and Ukraine are also partners in trading electricity. Other companies are active in the metallurgy and pharma industry.

*– Mr Ambassador, we are always pleased to welcome your participation in our presentations, roundtables, conferences, excursions, and other GDIP-organised events. We are sincerely grateful for your valuable trust and fruitful cooperation. Before the full-scale invasion, you visited a lot of regions, many of which have since been crippled by the war. Do you remember which region and which event impressed you the most?*

– Yes, you are right. I like participating in various events and travelling all around Ukraine. I prefer being on the ground, so to say, to paperwork in my office. You may know that I used to serve at our Embassy in Kyiv also in the past. I visited a lot of places and made great friends here.

Talking about events. I visited Ostroh and the famous National University of Ostroh Academy this year, and I really liked being there. When I have to say what impressed me the most, I picked up my visit to Iziium soon after it was liberated last autumn. There, I had a chance to see the destruction caused by the Russian aggression first-hand. And unfortunately, I am afraid there are a lot of towns and villages in Ukraine that were similarly destroyed.