

Vasyl BODNAR,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of Ukraine to the Republic of Türkiye*

DIPLOMACY DURING WAR: THE 12 MONTHS FOLLOWING 24 FEBRUARY 2022

Several days before 24 February 2022, I met Professor Hüseyin Bağcı, a lecturer and head of the Department of International Relations at the Middle East Technical University. At one time, when the professor used to be a member of the Valdai Discussion Club, his stance on the eight-year-long war could be described as at least ‘legally verified, politically neutral’. On the morning of 24 February 2022, he was among the people to whom I sent a message about the unprecedented Russian military invasion of Ukraine. At the time, the professor was at the Istanbul airport, and he sent me a photo of the airport terminal’s information board showing cancelled flights to Ukrainian cities. He asked me if Ukraine was making a stand against Russia’s military aggression. After I assured him Ukrainians would defend their borders until the very end, he replied that under international law, a war had just begun. A few days later, the professor spoke at an academic conference in Budapest, where he explicitly and convincingly described Russia’s conduct as acts of aggression and war. Since then, Hüseyin Bağcı has been a prominent participant during the events of the Embassy of Ukraine in Türkiye, whereas his ‘ex-friends’ from Russia ‘assisted’ in banning him from entering the territory of the Russian Federation.

Closure of the straits and Turkish recognition of the war

Despite its experience of rivalry with Russia around conflicts in Azerbaijan (Karabakh), Libya, and Syria, Türkiye was taken aback by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While the reaction of the authorities, media, and the public varied, compassion and sympathy for Ukraine altogether steered public opinion.

To address the pressing problems, we immediately sent meeting requests to Turkish senior officials. The first official to see me at 11 am on 24 February was the Turkish Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sedat Önal. One of our main requests was to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian military vessels.

An important detail here is that a few dozen Russian ships entered the Black Sea before 24 February, and another group of Russian military vessels — including *Marshal Ustinov* and *Varyag*, two large cruisers of the same class as the infamous *Moskva* — was awaiting clearance for passage through the Turkish straits.

Back then, we made considerable efforts to convince the Turkish authorities of the existence of an international armed conflict as per international law and activate the provisions of the Montreux Convention regarding the vessels of war belonging to belligerent powers. Moreover, as a result of our work, the constructive attitude of Turkish authorities, and our allies' actions, then-Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu acknowledged that what was initially an invasion had turned into a war. On 28 March 2022, Türkiye officially closed the straits for warships per the Montreux Convention; on 24 April 2022, the country closed its airspace for Russian military aircraft. Those steps significantly reduced the threat to Ukraine's south, ultimately creating the conditions for the grain corridor to function.

Information barrage

During the first days of the war, it was vital to disseminate the truth about the situation in Ukraine, our military's defensive actions, and the Ukrainian leadership's position to the Turkish public. Right from the first days of the war, we set up a press centre at the Embassy, with more than 30 journalists and 7–10 crews from leading Turkish TV channels and news agencies reporting from there. Every 2–3 hours throughout the day, we held briefings on the immediate situation and needs of Ukraine, relayed the messages of the President of Ukraine, and called for support for our citizens. Those briefings aired online on Turkish television, while news agencies and outlets simultaneously shared them on social media.

Such an information barrage allowed us to convey Ukrainian narratives to the Turkish audience, shape a solid understanding of Ukraine's plight, and mobilise significant amounts of humanitarian aid. Through constant updates and extensive coverage of events, we largely succeeded in preventing the spread of disinformation and fake news.

The Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar communities in major Turkish cities also contributed to raising awareness of the situation in Ukraine. They held their own events and information campaigns, helping to garner support and solidarity from Turkish society to help Ukraine.

Humanitarian aid

Volunteering and humanitarian aid have emerged as a key aspect of Turkish support for Ukraine. Since the last days of February 2022, the Embassy of Ukraine in Ankara has been a humanitarian hub, and the consulates in Istanbul and Antalya have served as logistics centres. The Embassy staff and their families became involved in the gathering and packaging of humanitarian aid. Foreign diplomats, Ukrainian citizens, and our Turkish friends have banded together to help Ukraine.

There are two stories from that time that will probably remain etched in my memory forever. The Embassy received a letter signed in a child's handwriting. In the envelope, apart from banknotes, was a letter from a little brother and sister: 5-year-old Ali and 7-year-old Melis. They lived in Ankara and had been saving up for a gaming console for themselves but decided instead to share their savings with Ukrainian children. On another day, Mrs Gizem came to the Embassy. We found out that she had taken off all her jewellery, including her wedding ring, and sold it to donate a thousand dollars to the needs of Ukrainians. Not long after, the Embassy's premises became insufficient for collecting and packing humanitarian aid, and so our true Turkish friend (the owner of the İlyas Kaya construction company), who had already donated \$10,000 to Ukraine on 25 February, rented a space to store the humanitarian aid at his own expense.

The efforts of Ukraine's honorary consuls also merit attention. Erkan Güral from Kütahya sent trucks with emergency aid to Ukraine, and the consuls in the city of Tekirdağ raised funds for bulletproof vests for Ukrainian soldiers.

Since 24 February 2022, the Embassy has organised and sent 188 truckloads of humanitarian aid, comprising personal hygiene products, blankets, food, clothing, medicines, medical supplies, body armour, and helmets. In 2022, tens of thousands of bulletproof vests and helmets were sent from Türkiye for the needs of the defence forces. Additionally, Ukraine received 22 ambulances.

It wasn't just private donors who provided aid. The Turkish Ministry of Health, Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, the Red Crescent, municipalities, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs collectively sent 178 trucks carrying food, tents, hygiene kits, medicines, baby food, and other essential items to Ukraine.

The Embassy opened accounts to raise funds in support of Ukraine and its Armed Forces. In 2022, we received \$331,165.17, all of which was spent on the needs of our population and the military. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) partnered with the Olena Zelenska Foundation to deliver 100 generators, 4,500 sleeping bags, 100 potbelly stoves, and 85 heaters to Kharkiv and another 80 generators to Kherson.

These joint efforts reflect Turkish solidarity and support, which has significantly contributed to improving the living conditions of Ukrainians affected by the war.

Evacuation of orphanages to Türkiye and assistance to Ukrainian citizens

The support was not restricted to aid deliveries to Ukraine, as some people actually needed to be evacuated from the country. As of March 2022, the Embassy has worked out the possibility of evacuating 56 orphanages of different profiles from the war-torn regions to Türkiye with the assistance of the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Services, the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy, and subsequently, the Childhood Without War charity project.

The evacuation plan included 1,600 orphans and their carers. The little guests would arrive in Turkish cities in groups of 150–190, and it was imperative to secure not only their long journey away from the shelling but also on-site accommodation, food, leisure, education, and medical care. Turkish private entrepreneurs offered rooms in their hotels, hostels, and even staff dormitories for the children to stay at for a few months. This process drew support from Turkish and international foundations such as Kızılay, UNICEF, ASAM, UNHCR, and many others. Ukrainian communities in Türkiye and volunteer movements also took an active part in helping with this. Thanks to their support, we managed to provide the children with the essential conditions for education, development, and adjustment to the new environment. We are talking not only about tangible contributions but also about emotional support, which is extremely important in times of war.

The Turkish Football Federation also temporarily accommodated a group of 150 children in a training camp in Trabzon.

Meanwhile, thanks to the support from various Turkish foundations and organisations, our children regularly attend guided tours and cultural programmes outside their primary places of residence. Moreover, they are offered Turkish language courses and mental health counselling. Ukrainian communities throughout Türkiye, including in Ankara, have provided children with the opportunity to study the Ukrainian and Turkish languages. The children now have access to a psychological support service operated by Ukrainian specialists. There is also a rehabilitation project for children with developmental disabilities at the rehabilitation centre in Antalya, which was launched jointly with ASAM.

The synergy between the Embassy's active work, volunteer efforts, and community support generated a wave of support for Ukraine in Türkiye. However, we haven't achieved everything we aimed for. Unfortunately, Türkiye still hasn't established a dedicated programme to support refugees from Ukraine. The reason for this is that the country has had programmes for refugees from other countries, which proved to be so financially costly for Türkiye that the decision to create a separate programme for Ukrainians was never approved. Nevertheless, Ukrainians enjoyed simplified entry into Türkiye until the end of 2023 and were exempted from fines for overstaying in the country.

Bilateral contacts

Despite the Russian invasion, we managed to sustain an active dynamic in Ukrainian-Turkish bilateral relations and contacts in 2022. Just before the war — on 3 February — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Ukraine for the 10th meeting of the High-Level Strategic Council, during which the two sides signed 10 bilateral documents, including the crucial Free Trade Agreement and a document on the construction of a Bayraktar production plant.

In the middle of the war, on 18 August, the Turkish President paid another visit to Ukraine to discuss further steps in the face of Russian aggression and the feasibility of Turkish participation in Ukraine's reconstruction. As a result of that meeting, the Ministry of Trade of Türkiye and the Ministry of Infrastructure of Ukraine signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the restoration of infrastructure in Ukraine.

We continued to develop our contacts at the first ladies' level. In October 2022, First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska visited Türkiye, while Emine Erdoğan has been an active participant in the First Ladies and Gentlemen's Summits and has fully supported the operations of the Olena Zelenska Foundation.

We also actively promoted the negotiation process between the Office of the President of Ukraine and the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. On 1 May, Senior Advisor to the President of Türkiye İbrahim Kalın arrived in Kyiv, and on 2 October, the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Andrii Yermak and İbrahim Kalın held talks in Istanbul.

2022 was a year of active exchanges between the Ukrainian and Turkish foreign ministers. On 10 March, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba visited Antalya and met with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to discuss Turkish mediation efforts. On 17 March, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Lviv to hold talks with Dmytro Kuleba. The ministers also met on 18 August during the Turkish President's visit to Lviv.

We also consistently worked to coordinate contacts, facilitate Turkish involvement in Ukraine's reconstruction, and ensure the development of sectoral cooperation, specifically in commercial, economic, military technology, defence industry, aircraft construction, energy, and agriculture.

Our interparliamentary dialogue also actively developed: The Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye attended the Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform, there were contacts during the G20 Summit, and the Verkhovna Rada and the Grand National Assembly have been in constant communication.

Turkish mediation in negotiation processes

A new chapter in the work of Ukrainian diplomats in Türkiye came with the attempts at a peaceful settlement of the war. Seeking to act as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Türkiye has been trying to find a way to start a negotiation process since the first days of the full-scale invasion. In March 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan invited Ukrainian and Russian representatives to negotiate in Antalya. However, the Russians came there not to look for a peaceful solution but only to give another 'lecture on Russian propaganda'. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba later noted that the

negotiating positions were so far apart and the Russian demands so outlandish that there was not even a remote prospect of a real solution.

Türkiye continued to play the role of a mediator, attempting to use ‘shuttle diplomacy’. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu paid visits to Moscow for talks with Sergey Lavrov and then to Lviv for meetings with Dmytro Kuleba.

Another example of concrete mediation efforts by Türkiye was the Ukrainian-Russian meeting in Istanbul at the end of March 2022, which served as an attempt to discuss the principles of a peaceful settlement for ending Russian aggression. Despite certain expectations, the Turkish mediation efforts were thwarted primarily by Russia’s latest crimes, redeployment of troops, and worldwide revelation of the atrocities committed in Bucha and Irpin.

Türkiye has once again emphasised that its position as a mediator requires it to remain neutral towards both sides. This explains its continued refusal to suspend economic dialogue with Russia and its rejection of sanctions. However, Türkiye also maintains its mediation position in the Russian-Ukrainian war, supports Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and condemns the occupation of Crimea. Overall, Ankara stands for the security of the Black Sea and the broader region, as does Kyiv. Therefore, since the beginning of the war, Ukrainian diplomats in Türkiye have been focusing on the security of the Black Sea and, most critically for Ukraine, the export of Ukrainian goods by sea.

Ukrainian grain

Ukraine is one of the world’s largest grain exporters, and before the war, it used to supply more than 45 million tonnes to the international market annually, so the issue of grain exports became a major concern not only for us but also for the countries of the Global South. Türkiye has played an important role in addressing the issue of Ukrainian grain exports since the war began. Inter-ministerial cooperation, the involvement of the UN, the desire of Ukraine and Türkiye to alter the situation and give it a clear framework, and most importantly, the success of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on the battlefield, led to Ukraine, Türkiye, and the UN signing a July 2022 grain agreement, better known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative or the Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports.

The resumption of Ukrainian grain exports through the Black Sea during the war was partly due to consistent top-level bilateral communication between Ukraine and Türkiye. The conclusion of the grain agreement came about thanks to the active role of Türkiye as a mediator. The Turkish government has demonstrated its ability to successfully negotiate and guarantee the safety of grain transportation, which was a crucial factor in the implementation of this initiative.

In April 2022, it became known that the Russians had begun to actively export plundered Ukrainian grain to international markets, including Türkiye. This

created a severe threat to Ukraine, as, in addition to causing us to suffer economic losses, such acts breached international law. We engaged all possible contacts at various levels to counter such smuggling. Through working with law enforcement agencies and prosecutors, who collected and investigated cases related to grain smuggling, and cooperating with independent experts and bloggers, who covered the problem in the media and helped raise public awareness, we exposed the companies and individuals involved in this Russian crime. Thanks to our close cooperation with the Turkish authorities, Turkish ports became inaccessible to Russian ships carrying stolen Ukrainian grain, resulting in a decrease in the scope of illegal exports of Ukrainian grain.

Exchange of prisoners of war

From the first days of the war, Türkiye actively brought up the issue of prisoner exchange and was ready to provide comprehensive assistance with the evacuation of civilians, the wounded, and other vulnerable groups from the coastal areas. The Turkish authorities even expressed their readiness to dispatch ships for this purpose, but the Russian government obstructed such efforts. Nevertheless, Türkiye has proven to be a trustworthy partner in the exchange of prisoners.

Thanks to the close cooperation of diplomats and humanitarian organisations, as well as the personal guarantees of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, we managed to achieve the safe release of Ukrainian soldiers, Heroes of Ukraine, who were held in Russian captivity. Türkiye engaged other international organisations and countries, creating a broad network of support and pressure on Russia, contributing to the successful outcome of the negotiations.

Türkiye took on the role of a mediator who could guarantee the implementation of the deal, becoming an important force in the difficult negotiations with Russia. As a result, on 21 September 2022, we managed to release five commanders involved in Azovstal's defence: Azov Commander Denys 'Redis' Prokopenko, his deputy Sviatoslav 'Kalyna' Palamar, senior Azov officer Oleh 'Apis' Khomenko, Acting Commander of the 36th Separate Marine Brigade Serhii 'Volyna' Volynskyi, and Commander of the 12th National Guard Brigade Denys Shleha, whom the Turkish President referred to as his personal guests in the Turkish territory. The news of the release of the Heroes thrilled Ukrainians as a real miracle.

Military assistance and the recovery

Since the war's initial days, Türkiye never eschewed helping Ukraine. We cannot disclose all details of its aid, but it would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Bayraktar TB2 combat drones, which helped halt the Russian offensive in the first few days, becoming a recognisable symbol among Ukrainians reflected in media and everyday life.

Ukraine's mutually beneficial cooperation with the Turkish Baykar Makina company began all the way back in 2018. During the full-scale invasion, Turkish combat drones proved to be instrumental in liberating the outskirts of Kyiv. The company itself has repeatedly provided pro bono drones and humanitarian aid. Bayraktars owe their global fame to Ukrainian soldiers. Once those combat drones were tested on the battlefield, their effectiveness became obvious to soldiers in many other countries. This led to an increase in the number of contracts, and now the company supplies these drones to 34 countries. A separate avenue of our cooperation is the development of a Baikar Makina production plant in Ukraine.

Furthermore, Ukraine signed a framework agreement with Türkiye to build two Ada-class corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy. These corvettes were named in honour of Ukrainian hetmans Ivan Mazepa and Ivan Vyhovskiy. With virtually no fleet, Ukraine is successfully undercutting the power of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, having already destroyed a third of its vessels. Concurrently, the Ukrainian Navy is being rebuilt, albeit outside the country for now.

Thus, cooperation between Ukraine and Türkiye has been a truly successful symbiosis. Turkish technologies glorify their country on Ukraine's war front, demonstrating high efficiency and reliability in real combat conditions. At the same time, military and humanitarian aid significantly strengthens Ukraine's defence capabilities and contributes to its recovery after Russian aggression ends.

Representatives of Turkish companies are actively involved in the implementation of projects related to Ukraine's recovery. For example, the ONUR Group has reconstructed the bridge in Irpin and laid thousands of kilometres of roads, helping Ukraine restore its transport infrastructure. Despite the full-scale war, the company has stayed in Ukraine and continues to implement projects across the country.

The TİKA organisation has worked on rebuilding hospitals in the city of Rivne and helped with the repairs of one of the buildings of the Kyiv National University after a missile strike nearby. These efforts have greatly contributed to the restoration of essential infrastructure and the improvement of living conditions for Ukrainians affected by Russia's war effort.

Despite all the hardships, Ukrainian-Turkish cooperation remains multifaceted and important. Türkiye demonstrates solidarity and continues supporting Ukraine's fight against the aggression by providing military, humanitarian, and diplomatic assistance. Türkiye also genuinely appreciated it when Ukrainians, who face incredible hardships at home, sent rescuers to help out during the earthquakes of early 2023.