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AZERBAIJANI-UKRAINIAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: THE OUTLOOK AND SHARED CHALLENGES

— *Your Excellency, Azerbaijan has demonstrated steadfast solidarity with Ukraine from the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion, offering humanitarian aid exceeding \$20 million, particularly in supporting Ukraine’s energy sector and aiding the recovery efforts in the Kyiv region. Could you please elaborate on the key initiatives undertaken by Baku in this assistance? What prospects for collaboration exist in the humanitarian sphere?*

— As you rightly mentioned, Azerbaijan, from the first days of the war, actively supports and assists Ukraine with different types of humanitarian assistance. And basically, the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine remains a top priority for Azerbaijan. Our first freight cargoes reached Ukraine on 27 February 2022, immediately following the outbreak of the war. So far, the volume of Azerbaijan’s humanitarian aid to Ukraine has already reached \$30 million.

We are focusing on four main directions while providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. First, energy security is of utmost importance. Over the last two years, Azerbaijan has steadfastly delivered various electric equipment to support Ukraine’s energy sustainability. For example, in 2022, we donated almost 100 transformers and generators. Last year, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, signed a decree to allocate an additional \$7.6 million to continue our assistance to Ukraine in the energy field. In early March this year, Azerbaijan delivered the latest batch of humanitarian aid in line with the President’s decree.

The second crucial direction is psychological and medical rehabilitation for Ukrainian children deprived of parental care. Throughout the past two years, we have provided more than 200 Ukrainian children with fully covered psychological and medical programmes in Azerbaijan. Therefore, it is quite an essential direction in our humanitarian aid because Azerbaijan is among the few countries that systematically and consistently help Ukraine with such rehabilitation programmes for children. At the same time, most recently, the Government of Azerbaijan has also decided to fund the repair and reconstruction of the shelter at the National Library of Ukraine for Children.



Зустріч керівника Одеської обласної державної адміністрації Олега Кіпера з Послом Азербайджану в Україні Сеймуром Мардалієвим

Meeting between Oleh Kiper, Head of Odesa Regional State Administration, and Seymur Mardalyev, Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Ukraine

The third important element of our aid, initiated last year, is humanitarian demining. As you know, Azerbaijan itself struggles with the demining of its liberated territories, which remain, unfortunately, heavily contaminated. We are investing significantly in demining efforts in our territories while receiving almost no international assistance in this field. The cases of Azerbaijan and Ukraine are similar, as both our countries remain the most heavily contaminated countries not only in Europe but globally. Despite all the challenges we have been facing now in demining our de-occupied territories, we also decided to help Ukraine. Last year, we donated a humanitarian demining machine produced in Azerbaijan and we are happy to hear that the authorities are using the machine to demine agricultural lands in the Kharkiv region.

Speaking about our assistance in humanitarian demining to Ukraine, I would also like to mention that this year, we intend to organise training for Ukrainian specialists in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) will conduct these sessions and cover various models of humanitarian demining. We are currently discussing the details and the programme of that training with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine and the State Emergency Service. This is quite a big portion of our work.

Another significant aspect of our initiatives is Azerbaijan's participation in Ukraine's recovery. At the Ukraine Recovery Conference in London last year,

Azerbaijan pledged to join the international efforts in rebuilding Ukraine. In doing so, we are focusing on the city of Irpin. You probably have heard that in 2022, SOCAR Ukraine reconstructed the Linguist Lyceum named after Zari-fa Aliyeva, a famous Azerbaijani ophthalmologist and academician. Moreover, SOCAR is currently engaged in renovating a polyclinic in Irpin. We have completed the first phase, and the second phase is currently underway with a focus on the reconstruction of the polyclinic.

Additionally, we will implement four large infrastructure projects of social and humanitarian nature in Irpin. I do not want to go into detail and name precisely which projects we want to implement. Now, we are at the last phase of discussions with our Ukrainian friends on executing those projects. Once we conclude these discussions, we will be more vocal about the concrete projects we plan to implement. Azerbaijan has stated on several occasions that we will continue to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine, so I cannot exclude that this aid and vector of our humanitarian policy towards Ukraine will expand.

— *Azerbaijan has already begun to reintegrate the territories of Karabakh after restoring its sovereignty there. Could you provide insights into the reintegration policies that Azerbaijan intends to develop? How do you envision Baku's experience in this regard being beneficial for Ukraine? What joint measures can Ukraine and Azerbaijan take to assist each other in restoring territories and rehabilitating the military and civil population?*

— The reintegration and rehabilitation of the liberated territories following the restoration of territorial integrity and complete sovereignty over the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan are now top priorities for the government. Reviving Garabagh and East Zangazur is imperative because, after 30 years of Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan and occupation of those territories, eight cities lay in ruins, with hundreds of villages remaining in terrible condition. We are now rehabilitating and reconstructing those territories out of nothing, from zero. We are implementing the 'smart village' and 'smart city' concept while rehabilitating de-occupied territories, and the Government of Azerbaijan has decided to establish a green energy zone in Garabagh and East Zangazur regions. We are investing billions to revive those territories.

As I have already mentioned, our main obstacle is the mine problem. In addition to mines, unexploded ordnance poses a significant threat. According to the available data, almost 1.5 million mines and explosive ordnance remain on those territories. Our utmost priority is to demine the territories because it is essential for us to return the displaced population to their homes. We have already started this process and divided it into several stages, and, for example, until 2026, we are planning to return 140,000 formally displaced population back to their ancestral lands and homes. However, ensuring a secure and safe environment is essential for this return.



Виступ Посла під час прийняття з нагоди Дня Незалежності Азербайджану

Ambassador's speech at the reception on the Independence Day of Azerbaijan

In parallel with demining, we implement social projects. We build the social infrastructure: schools, kindergartens, hospitals. Furthermore, we construct residential areas and create new job opportunities for returning population in the de-occupied territories.

In terms of linkages with Ukraine in those issues, we stand ready to share our experience on the reintegration and rehabilitation of the de-occupied territories. Moreover, we understand that there is also considerable interest from the Ukrainian authorities in learning about Azerbaijan's experience in this area. It is not all about demining since there are many other aspects, such as the methodology for returning displaced people and reconstructing those territories. There are plenty of issues where Ukraine could learn and benefit from Azerbaijan, and we are always willing to share our knowledge and help Ukraine in these matters.

— *With Azerbaijan set to host the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 29) in November 2024, the nation notably prioritises environmental protection efforts. Given the adverse ecological impacts of wars in both our countries, how do you envision a potential collaboration between Azerbaijan and Ukraine in demining, environmental protection and the restoration of biodiversity affected by war?*

— Of course, it is a great honour and a significant challenge for us to host a major UN conference like the Climate Change Conference (COP 29) in Baku,

scheduled for November later this year. It gives us a perfect opportunity to bring together stakeholders, not only governments but also financial institutions, UN agencies, and academic circles, to bring them together and discuss such a critical topic as climate change.

The impacts of climate change are visible worldwide, and we have to do more to address them. In Azerbaijan, 2024 has been proclaimed the Year of Solidarity for a Green World as the clean environment and green growth became one of the five priority areas of our new national development strategy. Hosting and presiding over COP 29 this year recognises Azerbaijan's endeavours in addressing climate change not only at the national but also at regional and global scales. It is an ideal occasion to unite the world around this crucial cause and define the next steps or roadmaps for collaborative action to mitigate climate change's consequences.

Regarding cooperation between Azerbaijan and Ukraine, we have already started our dialogue on the preparations for COP29. At the end of May, Ruslan Strilets, Minister of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources, visited Baku to attend a conference on the environmental impact of mines. His visit provided an excellent opportunity to discuss preparations for COP29 with his counterpart, Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan and COP29 President-designate Mukhtar Babayev. President Aliyev has already invited President Zelenskyy to attend COP29, and we eagerly anticipate his potential visit to Azerbaijan in November for the summit. Specific discussions between Azerbaijan and Ukraine on the COP 29 preparations are ongoing. In all other fields of activity, we remain open and transparent in our close cooperation with Ukraine.

— *Given Azerbaijan's rich natural resources and growing gas exports to Europe, could you elaborate on potential avenues for collaboration between Azerbaijan and Ukraine in energy initiatives?*

— Azerbaijan has evolved from primarily an exporter of crude oil to a reliable partner and exporter of natural gas, mainly to European countries. With the completion of the Southern Gas Corridor, Azerbaijan is now the natural gas supplier to several European countries. We enjoy a very successful collaboration with the European Union in energy security. Currently, Azerbaijan exports approximately 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually to European markets, with plans to increase this figure to 20 billion by 2027.

Everyone thinks exporting natural gas to European markets remains a main priority in Azerbaijan's cooperation with the EU. However, Azerbaijan is also expanding its energy partnerships to green energy. The projected increase in renewable electricity production will allow Azerbaijan to become an exporter of green electricity to European markets through the landmark trans-regional Black Sea Submarine Cable Project that Azerbaijan embarks on with partner countries such as Georgia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

Regarding Ukraine, we have had practical and solid cooperation in the energy field for many years. SOCAR, our state company, has been actively involved in Ukraine's energy sector. We are discussing various elements to expand our cooperation with Ukrainian friends in this field. I do not want to go into the details of those discussions as they are still underway. Nevertheless, the initiatives Azerbaijan and Ukraine are discussing will undoubtedly benefit both parties, deepening our strategic partnership and strengthening ties.

— *Mr Ambassador, could you provide an update on the current state of trade and economic relations between Ukraine and Azerbaijan? What strategies or initiatives do you believe could deepen the economic ties between our two nations?*

— The ongoing war in Ukraine has significantly impacted trade and economic relations. To illustrate it, let me provide some figures. Before the war, the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Ukraine, according to our estimates, was at \$1 billion. It may have been slightly higher based on Ukrainian assessments. During President Aliyev's visit to Kyiv in January 2022, he and President Zelenskyy committed to taking necessary actions to double our trade to at least \$2 billion. At that time, we discussed and agreed on many mutually beneficial initiatives and projects in various sectors, including energy and agriculture.

However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine prevented the realisation of these projects. In 2022, we observed a nearly 40% decrease in trade turnover, amounting to \$620 million, while in 2023, the situation got worse, and the turnover comprised around \$352 million. This disparity profoundly concerns both us and the Ukrainian side. The main reason for this decline is the closure of transport corridors and logistics. It seriously affected all our inspirations and intentions to further strengthen trade relations between the two countries.

Despite that, our current focus is on humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. However, the revival of economic and trade relations between our countries is still receiving constant attention. Recently, we have been busy discussing ways to at least return to pre-war levels of trade and economic cooperation with our colleagues in Kyiv. Both sides are eager to continue and identify new avenues for partnership. So let us see. We are optimistic about finding ways to return to the level of trade cooperation with Ukraine which reflects the solid economic potential of both countries.

— *Following your meeting with Acting Minister of Culture and Information Policy Rostyslav Karandiev in December 2023, could you outline any specific initiatives planned to highlight historical ties and strengthen cultural relations between Ukraine and Azerbaijan? How does the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Ukraine utilise public diplomacy instruments and engage with the diaspora in Ukraine to promote the Azerbaijani image?*



Посол Сеймур Мардалієв відвідав Львівщину з робочим візитом

Ambassador Seymur Mardaliyev paid a working visit to the Lviv region

— Strengthening traditionally strong cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Ukraine is essential for us, and we had indeed good discussions with Mister Karandiev. Our meeting, which remains fresh in my mind, focused on discussing and exchanging views on actions we can take amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. Azerbaijan helps Ukraine with humanitarian aid. Still, we also see cultural interaction and joint events in Ukraine as another form of support from Azerbaijan to the Ukrainian people during these challenging times. In the cultural field, there are big opportunities that we can undertake together. Specifically, it covers our experience in the rehabilitation of conflict-affected territories, including rehabilitating and reconstructing cultural property. There is much to learn from each other, and we look forward to sharing our experiences in renovating the cultural heritage. We have already started actively cooperating with libraries, but we could also extend this endeavour to museums and initiatives such as joint film festivals and cinema weeks in both Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Yes, it is not so easy. The main obstacle is a lack of robust transport communications and logistics, which affects the ability to organise good-quality exhibitions in Ukraine. This has always been our practice, as we have been very active in Ukraine's cultural life. At the same time, the role of the Azerbaijani diaspora and the Ukrainian community in Azerbaijan holds significant importance, particularly in maintaining intercultural dialogue and fostering people-to-people contacts.

— *In April 2024, you met with Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister Iryna Borovets, and the discussions centred on Azerbaijan's support of initiatives such as the Peace Formula, the International Crimea Platform, and the Global Peace Summit. Could you provide insights into Azerbaijan's current stance on joining these initiatives?*

— As strategic partners, Azerbaijan and Ukraine maintain an active political dialogue, engaging in good communications on both regional and global issues. I frequently visit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine to exchange views on various matters of mutual interest. These meetings provide valuable opportunities to deepen and strengthen mutual understanding. Additionally, Azerbaijan and Ukraine collaborate actively within international organisations, with Ms Borovets overseeing multilateral diplomacy. We have enough to discuss, and we very much look forward to continuing those discussions.

— *In your capacity as both Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Azerbaijan to Ukraine and Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan to GUAM, what is your perspective on the organisation's role in fostering cooperation among its member states and promoting cross-regional collaboration?*

— As I mentioned, Azerbaijan and Ukraine maintain a close interaction within international organisations. GUAM is of special significance in our multilateral cooperation with Ukraine. Azerbaijan is currently holding chairmanship in the Organisation, and we will spare no effort to enhance cooperation and achieve progress in priority areas within the Organisation. I do believe GUAM is important for all its member states, not only for Ukraine and Azerbaijan. We



Вшанування пам'яті видатної вченої Заріфи Алієвої в Ірпені

Honouring the memory of outstanding scholar Zarifa Aliyeva in Irpin

have quite an active agenda within GUAM, and our interaction spectrum within the Organisation is broad. We actively cooperate in economic and trade relations, working together to promote transport corridors that are relevant to all of us. Additionally, we take measures to promote free trade issues in the region as a free trade zone among the member states has been established. This year, we also focus on enhanced cooperation and dialogue on climate action in light of preparations for COP29 in Baku. Moreover, we actively cooperate in consular affairs and combating organised crime. As chair of GUAM this year, we have also proposed including essential topics such as the exchange of experience and sharing knowledge in the post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction and demining in GUAM activities. With frequent meetings at the level of sectorial ministries of member states, we see both interest and good potential to continue this cooperation.

I would like to thank GDIP for initiating this interview on the current state of play in our relations with Ukraine. I wish Ukraine peace and a safe blue sky above it. This is very important.

Interview dated 6 June 2024