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‘OUR POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO UKRAINE IS CONSISTENT FROM TOP TO BOTTOM’

— *Your Excellency, according to the Belgian Foreign Ministry, the planned Belgian support to Ukraine for 2024–25 stands at €1.7 billion — more than a three-fold increase compared to the total support throughout 2022–23. Such dynamics prove the promising outlook of Belgian-Ukrainian relations. From your point of view, what are the strongest features of our bilateral ties and which ones have improved the most over the recent past?*

— The Belgian Government understands the geopolitical challenge posed by the war of aggression waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. We also understand that, at this point, military support is the most support we can deliver to Ukraine, which is why half of the money set aside for 2023–24 will go to military support: ammunition, vehicles, etc. We participate in the Czech initiative to supply artillery shells. We also participate in the F16 coalition with planes, and another major contribution is not just the training of pilots but also of Ukrainian support and maintenance technicians because you cannot fly planes without maintaining them. Training technicians and pilots is equally important, so that’s what we are doing.

Over the past two years, Ukraine has become a focal point of international attention. However, it has lost its place at the top of the international agenda after the conflict in Gaza broke out. So, although, in general, public opinion and civil society in Belgium are still very much in favour of supporting Ukraine, I can detect that there is a bit less media and political attention to the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, after more than two years of war, this is also a normal effect of wearing down. Despite that, I think that, overall, we will continue trying to do our share with our partners in supplying the much-needed support to Ukraine. Military support is the first priority, but we also pay strong attention to humanitarian support, much of which goes through UN organisations. We are also looking at starting our own bilateral cooperation here with Ukraine with a €150-million programme. However, it is still in the preparatory stages. We have not started yet but are looking to develop that.

The final thing is that we presently hold the EU Presidency and are working very hard to ensure that Ukraine gets to the starting line and that the actual negotiations for Ukraine’s accession to the EU can still start during our

Presidency. Our Presidency lasts until the end of June, and our political agenda is to get Ukraine to the starting line of the talks where the formal process of the negotiations can begin.

— *The beginning of 2024 saw a major strengthening of formal cooperation between Ukrainian and Belgian defence companies, followed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between our defence ministries and positive steps in the preparation of the F16 provision. Please outline Belgium's current vision for long-term military aid and cooperation.*

— First of all, the Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation between the military and defence industries is, as a matter of fact, already a long-term matter.

Because of the war that Russia now wages against Ukraine, there has been a wake-up call among the Western allies that we went too far in drawing on the peace dividend that became available after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the disappearance of the Iron Curtain. We realise that we need to make an earnest effort to strengthen our military, which also means we need to strengthen all of the logistical chains across the defence industries that are the basis of a strong military. We need our own defence industry. So, in a way, Ukraine was a wake-up call. It has also brought a massive change in the perception of NATO's importance. We have seen that NATO has been strengthened by two new member states, and very important ones: Finland and Sweden.

Lastly, of course, if you look at the longer term, then in practice, Ukraine is already moving on from the old Soviet army style towards a more modern NATO-style military force. This also applies to the assets: you move, for example, from 152 mm old-style Russian-Soviet shells to the NATO-standard 155 mm shells, and the same goes for a whole range of other ammunition. That transition was almost inevitable because, of course, the Russians have done everything to cut off Ukrainian access to Soviet-standard supplies. Ukraine's longer term lies in Western military standards and NATO-style logistics, tactics, etc.

But then there is something else. I think that Ukraine also has a lot to offer to the allies because you have been able to find very creative avant-garde solutions, for example, using drones and alert systems that you have puzzled together with sometimes very inventive and limited means. Ukraine has a lot to offer that we can learn from as Western allies.

— *Please tell us about the progression of the discussion regarding the frozen Russian assets. Towards what kinds of aid might the funds from those assets be eventually allocated?*

— There are three things: it's like a three-stage rocket. First of all, you have the taxes levied on the profits generated by the frozen assets, which produce interest and dividends. We levy a 25% corporate tax on those profits, and that percentage goes directly to Ukraine via the Ukraine fund the Belgian government has set up.

The second thing is the actual profits themselves, the money generated by the capital of around 190 billion euros. Those profits can also be used directly, and that's a bigger chunk of money. Those profits will be generated as long as these assets remain frozen. There are discussions among the EU member states about the direct use of these assets and profits to help Ukraine. The initial proposal was to use these profits for the reconstruction of Ukraine, but most people now understand that it's more important to use them also for military support. However, there is no consensus yet. Nevertheless, I've mentioned that Belgium currently holds the EU Presidency, and we are, of course, in the driver's seat to make sure that we can reach that consensus and find a compromise. That is also one of our political objectives to be reached by the end of our Presidency.

The third thing is the use of the actual capital, the principal sum of €190 billion. We are ready to implement any solution with a solid legal basis that the international community comes up with. If the G7 reaches a consensus, we will implement it. We aren't there yet, but I think everybody agrees with the moral and political objective of making Russia pay for its aggression. Now, how this will be done on a legally sound basis is still an object of discussion because we do not want to fall into the trap of violating the rule of law, which is one of the principles and values that we defend, just because the Russians are violating the rule of law, to begin with, the UN Charter and so many other international treaties that they have signed and ratified and should respect and implement.

This is, of course, a long-term perspective because as long as the war is going on, it's very difficult to talk about actual reconstruction projects since we see every day that Russians continue to destroy Ukrainian infrastructure, hospitals, schools, housing, etc.

— *Your Excellency, you have already mentioned Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which marks the first half of 2024. In this context, please tell us more about the successes and the challenges your country has had to navigate in terms of support for Ukraine — one of the Presidency's objectives, according to Prime Minister Alexander De Croo.*

— I think it's fair to say that the approval of the support package of 50 billion euros is an achievement — a success to which we, as the Presidency, have contributed. We may not have played a central role in the approval of the package, but we definitely have contributed to it.

I think it's also fair to say that we are very happy that the Ukraine plan is now the central piece for the reconstruction of Ukraine. That is also good news, as well as something that happened under our Presidency. As I said, we are working towards the start of the formal accession process, and these talks are ongoing.

I'm glad that you mentioned Prime Minister De Croo because our political commitment to Ukraine is consistent from top to bottom: our Prime Minister is fully committed to achieving success during our Presidency for Ukraine; all of

us working as diplomats, as officials, as negotiators, we all share that same commitment of reaching that goal. Our political commitment is there; it's real, and it's not just words. We are trying to move towards operational success, which I think we have been able to do so far. I really do hope that the start of the accession negotiations will be the crowning achievement of our Presidency.

The difficulties are the same as always in the EU: finding consensus among the 27. We try to understand the viewpoints of all EU Member States and find solutions that are workable for all while maintaining the overall objectives of our Presidency in supporting Ukraine.

— *In April 2024, during your visit to the city of Kryvyi Rih, you emphasised Belgium's role in the city's emergence as a major industrial centre and discussed the possibility of establishing a sister city relationship between Kryvyi Rih and one of Belgium's industrial cities. Are there other places in Ukraine where Belgium considers boosting comprehensive inter-regional cooperation, also keeping in mind that Belgium previously received a proposal to partake in the rebuilding of the Mykolaiv region?*

— What I mentioned in Kryvyi Rih is also that twin or sister cities, is a local initiative that is not under the control of the federal Belgian government. These are decisions that are taken by the cities or municipal authorities that wish to cooperate. Nevertheless, as Embassy, we are very happy to assist and cooperate on that.

Yes, like all international partners of Ukraine, we also received a request from Ukraine to focus on a particular area. I've mentioned the €150 million programme that we will make available for Ukraine. The areas which we will focus on are Chernihiv and the outskirts of Kyiv. We are not able to spread our assets too thin since then our work would not be very focused, making it more difficult to follow up on things. Chernihiv is a place where we think we can make a difference. We've already had a few missions to Chernihiv. Notably, our Cooperation Minister was there in February, and she had contacts with the local administration. However, as I said, we are in the process of starting up that kind of cooperation.

— *As the war progresses, mines and unexploded ordnance are increasingly threatening the long-term safety of millions of Ukrainians. Belgium — the first country in the world to prohibit anti-personnel mines — has been prolific at worldwide humanitarian demining efforts. What can you tell us about Belgium's vision of addressing this problem over the years to come?*

— Indeed, we have a long history and experience with demining. Our demining services still dig up about 20 tonnes of mines, unexploded ordnance, and artillery shells every year. That's just from the battlefields of World War I, in a small area of Belgium. It's more than a century after the end of WWI, and we are still digging up the unexploded ordnance, so we are very much aware of the long-term risks this problem poses.

We have financed programmes of the UNDP. We have also trained a number of Ukrainian soldiers in maritime demining, which is a specific niche that you'll also need because of the mines in the Black Sea. The Flanders Government has also worked with an NGO that is training demining dogs. And, of course, we are very encouraged by the initiatives taken by Vice Prime Minister Yuliia Svyrydenko, who's working on a strategy together with the UNDP to streamline all the different actors active in the demining field in Ukraine.

— *Please tell us about the Embassy's interactions with various Ukrainian universities and schools. What kind of education cooperation does Belgium seek with Ukraine?*

— Education and culture are not a competence of the Belgian central Federal Government; they are the competence of the regional governments: the French-speaking Community government and the Dutch-speaking government of Flanders. They deal with the issues related to education and culture. We play a bit of a coordination role as the Embassy, but those two governments also have the competence to execute their own foreign policy in these domains.

Very often, education cooperation among universities is university-to-university. The Belgian universities then get financing, for example, from either the French- or Dutch-speaking governments for those kinds of projects. The Federal Government does not come into play here.

— *What can you tell us about the various public diplomacy projects your Embassy engages in to promote Belgian culture and facilitate understanding between our peoples?*

— I do my own public diplomacy by going to universities. I've been to cities such as Lviv and Odesa and have spoken at various universities and higher education institutions in Kyiv about Belgium, the EU, and our EU Presidency. My audience there is students, so I'm trying to give them an idea of what the EU is all about. I suppose you could also describe that as promoting Belgian culture.

We've also been buying a number of comic books like *The Adventures of Tintin*, *The Smurfs*, and adult comic books that have been published in Ukrainian. We have purchased a number of those books and sent them to public libraries all over Ukraine. It's a smaller-scale project, but it's something that gives us some cultural visibility. We did this last year, and we are planning to do so again this year with new books that are coming out.

Other things often fly under the radar, and we don't necessarily know about them. However, when we do, we are trying to promote them. For example, a Ukrainian filmmaker is working on a documentary about Belgian influence in Donbas. Of course, we help such projects with the materials that we have, our expertise, and a little bit of funding.

For example, a musical evening by a Ukrainian military band has played in Antwerp in early May. I went there and said a few words for Ukrainians in

Ukrainian and for Belgians in Dutch, etc. Just being present is also something that is part of my job in terms of public diplomacy.

— *Your Excellency, as you're approaching the end of your tenure as Ambassador of Belgium to Ukraine, how would you like to summarise your experience of working in Ukraine?*

— This has been a rocky ride for me because I came here in July 2022 to open the Embassy after the evacuation. We had to get everything back up and running. After all, when the Embassy is evacuated, a lot of the systems are just taken down, dismantled, or destroyed, so you have to rebuild a lot of things. Once that was done, at the beginning of October 2022, Russian missile and drone attacks on Kyiv started, and we had a difficult winter with blackouts, etc. It was another logistical challenge, requiring us to have everything in place where we needed it not to lose access to electricity, heat, water, etc. So, we faced this logistical challenge while maintaining the diplomatic work as part of our regular jobs. In a way, it has been a job where I needed to fire on all twelve cylinders — having to cover a lot of subjects that you don't necessarily cover in many other embassies or circumstances: not only the military aspects but humanitarian ones, human rights, the whole cooperation with UN organisations, trade, financial aspects, EU cooperation, etc. It has involved the full gamut of public diplomacy and what one can do as an ambassador. That has been a lot of work but also a very rewarding experience.

— *You must have learned a lot about Ukraine since your arrival. What is your impression of the country, its people and culture?*

— I was never a specialist in this part of the world. For me, it was a mission of discovery. I have tried to be a very serious student of Ukraine's history, which is very fascinating. I've also made a big effort to learn Ukrainian. I have mixed feelings about leaving Ukraine soon: one part of me would like to continue, but on the other hand, I also know from experience that sometimes it's best not to stay too long, in particular in crisis zones. But for me, it's been eye-opening to discover how rich the history and culture of Ukraine are. I've tried to travel all over the country as much as I could, from Odesa to Chernihiv, from Lutsk to Kherson. It may be a cliché that you're all tired of hearing, but I've come to know Ukrainians as a very resourceful and resilient people who deserve the admiration and help of the entire world.

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