

Annely KOLK,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Republic of Estonia to Ukraine*

ESTONIANS' BIG HEARTS AND WORRIES FOR UKRAINE ARE OUR MOST VALUABLE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ASSETS



— *Your Excellency, you assumed the post of Ambassador of the Republic of Estonia to Ukraine in the summer of 2023. What were your first impressions of our country?*

— My first impressions were wonderful and also realistic — when we entered Ukraine, I saw amazing sunflower fields under a blue sky, and it immediately reminded me of your flag. At the same moment, an air alert started to work — I had never heard that sound before — so it gave me a realistic picture of Ukrainian people's everyday life under Russian threats.

Ukrainian hospitality, friendship, braveness and resilience have kept positively surprising

me every day since then.

— *Your Excellency, we are incredibly grateful to Estonia for supporting Ukraine during the war. Estonia plans to provide Ukraine with military support in the amount of 0.25% of its GDP until 2027. Could you please tell us what exactly was the basis for this strategic decision and what this support will include?*

— Estonia has been, is and will be a strong supporter of Ukraine over the years, especially since the full-scale war. Estonians know how hard it can be to live under occupation or to have relatives deported; we remember very well from our history the cruelties of tyrannical regimes. Estonia also knows that the future structure of European security architecture will be decided now in Ukraine. Unfortunately, Ukrainians are paying a very heavy price daily for democracy and humanity to prevail.

Thus, it's natural that Estonia supports Ukraine as much as possible and with every means possible. We are loudly not only advocating for the victory of Ukraine but also reminding everybody that it is of utmost importance for future generations that the Putin regime must be defeated. That regime has to



Аннелі Кольк на пресконференції в Харкові, квітень 2024 року

Anneli Kolk at a press conference in Kharkiv, April 2024

understand that the price for their cruel war will be very high, even intolerable. In that, we advocate for the creation of a Special Tribunal and accountability for troika members [President, Prime Minister, and Minister for Foreign Affairs], we work towards usage of Russian frozen assets to rebuild Ukraine, etc.

Estonia knows very well what is at stake in the brutal Russian war against Ukraine; therefore, our Government's decision to allocate 0.25% of its GDP yearly to Ukraine has been taken and will be implemented for the next 4 years.

— *Estonia participates in the training programme for the Ukrainian military as part of the European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine. In January 2024, your country announced its decision to join Operation Interflex in the United Kingdom. Ms Ambassador, what experience could Ukraine share from its side?*

— As Estonia strongly supports Ukraine's accession to the European Union and NATO, we support the idea to include Ukrainian experts in every cooperation field already in the accession phase. Ukraine can learn a lot from joint exercises and projects with European Union and NATO member states. Moreover, I would like to emphasise that also vice versa — the European Union and NATO can learn a lot from Ukraine's experiences and lessons learned in its everyday struggle for the liberation of its land and people from the aggressor.

— *Not only the government but also the people of Estonia have proved to be the closest friends of Ukraine. Can you share some insights into how Estonian society has mobilised to support Ukraine, including crowdfunding projects and other initiatives?*

— I am proud of my country because the people, Government, Parliament — the whole society — have mobilised since 24 February 2022 to help Ukraine. We have a saying in Estonia that ‘One cannot have the future without remembering the past’. Every Estonian family has had tragedies in the past from the Soviet occupation. Therefore, it was so natural for Estonians to mobilise in 2024, as well as to help Ukrainian friends in 2022 in facing terror nobody thought could be possible in the 21st century anymore.

Every week, Estonians send help to Ukraine to ease humanitarian and military needs. For example, during my nine months in Ukraine, I have welcomed many Estonians in the Embassy who bring humanitarian assistance, mobile hospitals, vehicles, or even saunas (!) to Ukrainian warriors on battlefields. Not to mention the help Estonians are offering to Ukrainians who have escaped war to my country.



Передавання банних комплексів бригаді Національної гвардії від естонських волонтерів, квітень 2024 року

Handover of a sauna complex to a National Guard brigade by Estonian volunteers, April 2024



Передавання Збройним силам України транспортних засобів від естонських волонтерів

Handover of vehicles to Ukrainian Armed Forces by Estonian volunteers

In total — people, state, private sector and NGOs of Estonia have donated an estimated €25.75 million to Ukraine, with the state contribution standing at €6.65 million. Our humanitarian aid is aimed at the regions that have suffered the most in the war, as well as at internally displaced people and Ukrainian refugees. Military assistance to Ukraine has been worth nearly €500 million, or more than 1.4% of our GDP.

— *Estonia became the first EU country to develop a mechanism for confiscating Russia's frozen assets. How will this system work and what will the assets be used for if the law is passed?*

— According to estimates, there are a total of €300 billion worth of frozen Russian assets in EU and G7 countries. There are about €19 million worth of frozen Russian assets in Estonia.

Time is running out for the aggressor. We must convince the international community that aggression does not pay off and that aggression is irreversibly illegitimate. To that end, Russia must compensate for the damage done by its illegal actions in Ukraine. One of the future preconditions for lifting the EU sanctions should be that Russia has compensated for the damage done in Ukraine. Until Russia has not paid reparations, we need to find possibilities to use Russia's sovereign assets and frozen assets to pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine and for the damages caused by Russia.

As an example, Estonia is going forward with a national draft law that allows the use of frozen assets for advance payment of damages if Russia is not willing to pay for them. According to the Estonian draft law, the precondition for using frozen assets is that a state has caused damage by violating the prohibition of the use of force and then fails to compensate for it. This verified claim can then be covered by the frozen assets of persons who are proven to be connected to the aggressor state.

Preliminary review by the administrative court is foreseen. This review is also necessary to unfreeze the assets if they are frozen under EU law. The person whose assets are used for advance payment of damages receives a 'right to claim'. The satisfaction of such a claim can be made when the aggressor has complied with its obligations to compensate.

The breach of the fundamental right to property is proportional and will be reviewed by the court in each individual case. The possibility for the individuals to get their money back in the future is in line with the nature of the sanctions (temporary and reversible).

In order to settle these advance payments in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, Estonia needs to conclude a treaty with Ukraine or a future international compensation mechanism. The first step of the compensation mechanism is the Register of Damage created by the Council of Europe.

Estonian draft law has passed the second reading in Parliament and hopefully will be adopted soon.

— *Ms Ambassador, could you please tell us what measures Estonia is taking to support the implementation of the Peace Formula?*

— Estonia has supported President Zelenskyy's Peace Formula since its beginning. We have been advocating and active in several points of the Formula, for example, point No. 7, which is about accountability. Estonia is also co-chair of Working Group No. 5, which is mostly about UN Security Council reform. We have participated in all national security advisers' and other meetings organised by Ukraine on the Peace Formula. We have also promised to participate in the Peace Summit in June.

We are committed to all 10 points of the Peace Formula and help Ukraine with everything needed from us.



Овруцький дитячий садок, який збудувала Естонія

Kindergarden in Ovruch built by Estonia



Відкриття 2-ї черги дитячого садка в Овручі, лютий 2024 року

Opening of the 2nd stage of kindergarten in Ovruch, February 2024



Форум відновлення на Житомирщині за співорганізаторства Естонії, 27 вересня 2022 року

Recovery Forum in the Zhytomyr region organised with Estonian support, 27 September 2022

— *In 2022, Estonia was one of the first to take on the recovery of Ukraine. A renovated kindergarten in Ovruch was opened in the Zhytomyr region under the patronage of your country, and Estonia co-financed the reconstruction of the Irsha River bridge. What are your plans and prospects in this regard?*

— Estonia was one of the first countries who emphasised the need to start rebuilding Ukraine already during the devastating war. We must not wait until the end of the war for reconstruction efforts but begin to give Ukrainians hope immediately. As everyone's resources are not unlimited, Estonia decided to choose Zhytomyr oblast for comprehensive reconstruction. For example, when we started a project to rebuild an Ovruch kindergarten, we also worked out a larger project to provide the same kindergarten with educational training, equipment and everything else from a larger perspective. Kindergarten teachers are also trained in Estonia.

In the course of Estonia's development cooperation in 2022 and 2023 (through ESTDEV and other partners), 29 projects were completed in areas such as the digital transition, education, good governance and entrepreneurship, totalling €13.25 million. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the sector-based financing by Estonia's public sector has been €4 million (2022) and €8 million (2023) respectively, or €12 million in total. In 2022, Estonia was the co-organiser of two regional reconstruction conferences — in Zhytomyr in September and in Tallinn in December.

— *Estonian assistance in the social sphere covers a huge range of initiatives, from building shelters in schools to providing rehabilitation and prosthetics for Ukrainian defenders in Estonia. Your Excellency, please share a few examples of such projects and plans in this area.*

— Estonia's Areas of Focus for Rebuilding Ukraine:

- Reconstruction — deliver resilient, inclusive, and sustainable recovery and reconstruction projects;
- Accession to the European Union — support Ukraine in becoming a democratic, independent, and prosperous member state of the EU;
- Digital Transformation — promote and develop transparent e-services across all sectors;
- Education — advance education management, digital skills development, and education innovations, including the digitalisation of the education system and development of e-learning;
- Democracy — promote transparent and inclusive governance and the rule of law, strengthen strategic communication, the independent media, and the fight against disinformation.

Priority Areas of Estonian Development Cooperation in Ukraine:

- Democracy and good governance — contributing to structural reforms, supporting regional development, strengthening independent media, and including civil society in governance and reform processes;



Естонська делегація на Фестивалі думок, який відбувся за підтримки Естонії, 30 вересня 2023 року

Estonian delegation at the Opinion Festival supported by Estonia, 30 September 2023



Відкриття мосту в Малині, який відбудували за підтримки Естонії, 3 жовтня 2023 року

Opening of a bridge in Malyn reconstructed with Estonian support, 3 October 2023

- Entrepreneurship — contributing to the development of start-ups, supporting the development of small businesses, and increasing employment;
- Education — updating the education system to meet the needs of the labour market and developing digital competencies.

We are working in cooperation with Ukrainian authorities and local communities in those fields all over Ukraine.

— *We are proud that Ukraine and Estonia have established an ongoing dialogue at the level of presidents, prime ministers,*

relevant ministers, and the contribution of embassies to this is considerable. Could you please tell us about the Embassy's cooperation with Ukrainian government agencies, regional authorities, non-governmental organisations or businesses?

— I was very happy and lucky to start working in Ukraine with an excellent team and cooperation with Ukrainian authorities. We are in constant contact with authorities in the Zhytomyr region, the Ministry of Reconstruction, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and other authorities. Thanks to many visits of Estonian authorities to Ukraine, we have excellent cooperation with the Office of the President, the Prime Minister's Office as well as good colleagues in the Verkhovna Rada.

— *Ukraine and Estonia are leading the way in digitalisation and e-governance, and our Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov was learning from his Estonian colleagues before the ministry was created. Ms Ambassador, how is bilateral cooperation in information technology developing today?*

— Estonia and Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States decided to set up a system aimed at amplifying the cyber support of donors to Ukraine in the civilian domain. The plan, composed by all participating states in Tallinn on 30 May, was launched on 20 December 2023 and the system was named the Tallinn Mechanism after the location of the initial meeting.

Until now, various states have provided assistance to Ukraine on an ad hoc basis. With the Mechanism, Ukraine's needs will be systemised and matched to the possibilities of donors in such a way that support from various countries forms a coherent whole. Unfortunately, it is likely that Russia's cyberattacks will continue for the foreseeable future. This is why, with the Mechanism, we offer a chance to reinforce Ukraine's systematic preparedness and resilience to cyberattacks in the long term.



Амбасадорка Кольк на конференції від «Вокс Україна» з питань відбудови України, листопад 2023 року

Ambassador Kolk at VoxUkraine conference on rebuilding Ukraine, November 2023

The Mechanism involves top tech companies and NGOs from donor countries and allows us to pass on information about urgent and long-term needs to Estonian companies. On the national level, €500,000 was allocated from the 2024 development cooperation budget.

NATO and the EU are observers in the Tallinn Mechanism. The Mechanism has an Estonian front office in Kyiv, a Polish back office in Warsaw, and a coordination group that unites representatives of Ukraine and all donors. The Mechanism is open to new members once relevant conditions have been agreed upon.

The Tallinn Mechanism works in parallel with the IT Coalition that addresses Ukraine's cyber issues in the military domain.

Estonia and Ukraine enjoy excellent cooperation in this field daily, if not hourly.

— *Ukrainians appreciate Estonia very much. We share a common pain, history, values, and freedom-loving spirit. Your Excellency, how does the Embassy help Ukrainians discover the peculiarities of your country? Please share your experience of public diplomacy projects and what kind of reception you have found among Ukrainians.*

— My motto has been the same since the beginning: the Estonian Embassy is here for the whole of Ukraine. Our team pays visits to different regions to show solidarity with every city and every region of Ukraine. During our visits, we also share our experience on our path to the European Union and NATO to help Ukrainians prepare for their accession.



Амбасадорка під час зустрічі з працівниками ДСНС України

Ambassador during the meeting with the State Emergency Service of Ukraine

I have also visited front-line areas in the Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia regions — Lyman, Kurakhove, Orikhiv, Kupiansk area, and Kharkiv itself, with volunteers bringing humanitarian aid to soldiers on the battlefield. I think it's very important to talk to soldiers and commanders, as well as local authorities to have a direct picture of Ukrainian needs. The personal touch is valuable in assessing urgent needs and informing my capital. It also helps decision-makers in Tallinn to concentrate our efforts in the most urgent areas and to provide info to other allies and partners.

Last but not least, the best public diplomacy actors of Estonia in Ukraine are Estonian people — those bringing weekly humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, as well as those living in Estonia and providing their help, advice, and hospitality to Ukrainians in Estonia. Their big hearts and worries for Ukraine are our most valuable public diplomacy assets.

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