

Pier Francesco ZAZO,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Italian Republic to Ukraine (2021–24)*

‘ITALY IS ONE OF UKRAINE’S CLOSEST ALLIES, AND NOTHING WILL CHANGE IT’

— *Mr Ambassador, your mission has been actively engaged in supporting humanitarian initiatives in Ukraine, particularly in demining and aiding areas affected by Russian aggression. Could you please share which of the projects you are most proud of? Do you have any thoughts on Italy’s plans regarding this support after your mission is over?*

— The Embassy is very active in the humanitarian field. There is the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation dealing with development aid under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We opened an office of the Agency in Kyiv and started to carry out many programmes in the humanitarian sphere. Our NGOs also act in all kinds of areas. We are active in the demining field, for example, allocating a grant to the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, as well as in the health and energy sectors. Italy provided a soft loan of €100 million to rebuild the destroyed hydroelectric infrastructure in the region of Nova Khakovka. We have also supplied plenty of generators, materials, and turbines, to list a few. Moreover, the Italian Civil Protection Department facilitates the provision of humanitarian assistance to the Ukrainian population.

There are also plans to do a lot in cultural heritage to help you rebuild the damaged cultural sites, especially in Odesa, where we are pretty active because Genoa and Valencia are its twin cities. And there are many more projects to come. At the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin, our Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani announced new contributions for the amount of €140 million in the fields of demining, energy resilience, cultural heritage, and the health sector. Along with other sectors, humanitarian aid is our priority, and we need to do this.

— *Your Excellency, the Italian Embassy in Ukraine has implemented a number of cultural initiatives, such as the donation of musical instruments to the Kharkiv Music College. Could you elaborate on the role of cultural diplomacy in strengthening the relations between our countries?*

— Yes, we have done a lot. We are one of the few Embassies that have decided to maintain the activities of our cultural institute in Ukraine, notwithstanding the war. Although the Italian Cultural Institute is currently based in Lviv for security reasons, we are planning to move to Kyiv. We have organised many events and sponsored musical projects, seminars, and conferences. For example, one week ago, I took part in an important event with the participation of Italian

historians who were explaining the essence of the Ukrainian cultural identity to the Italian audience. It is crucial to explain to the Italian public, which unfortunately is still very much influenced by the Russian disinformation, that Ukraine is not Russia. Therefore, the Embassy promotes many events of this kind. We explain, especially to the Italian people, not so much to the Ukrainians, that Ukrainian history has solid links with European history, that Ukrainians have a Cossack spirit and are different from the Russians. We are translating books in this field. For example, I am a good friend of Yaroslav Hrytsak, and his book has been translated into Italian. We are promoting all Italian writers, historians, or politicians who understand that your fight is for freedom and that you are trying to defend your national identity.

Then, of course, just to give an example, on 8 June 2024, we organised an event with the involvement of the Italian tenor Alberto Profeta at the beautiful Odesa National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre. We plan to continue this. We have organised events in the field of contemporary art and so on. Because we know very well that Ukrainians and Italians are very close when it comes to culture: we both like music, so there is a strong relationship and empathy. I would have liked to do more, but it was terrible luck, firstly because of the COVID pandemic (I left Ukraine in January 2020) and then because of the war. I am a little repentant that I would have liked to do more, but I think we did our best.

I would also like to underline that we look forward to promoting the Italian language. It is essential because so many Ukrainians love our culture and language. We are now trying to strengthen our support with Italian language courses in various universities. Moreover, I think there is a field where Italy can do a lot: restoration of cultural heritage. Our country has expertise, and we could help Ukraine. Because you have a great background: your mosaics, Byzantine and Ukrainian Baroque churches, and so on, and we have a lot of know-how in this field and would like to help you.

Now, we are really starting to create the right conditions to support you, and we are looking forward to helping you create master plans. You have beautiful cities, but you need help in preserving and creating excellent historic centres. Frankly, I am pretty convinced that now everyone in the world knows where Ukraine is located on a geographical map. I am confident that many tourists will come to Ukraine when the war ends.

— *You have repeatedly emphasised the importance of economic cooperation between Italy and Ukraine. Could you please highlight some of the specific economic projects or investments that stood out during your mission here?*

— First of all, before the war, Italy was already Ukraine's third-largest trading partner among the European Union countries, after Germany and Poland. Our trade relations were significant, with Italy exporting food, design products, and machinery and importing numerous raw materials from Ukraine.

Unfortunately, the war somewhat disrupted the trade dynamic, but now I am pleased to say that our bilateral trade is returning to the old levels. We have a solid trade exchange.

We need to do more in the sphere of Italian investment in Ukraine. Currently, there is a huge interest from Italian companies. We have complementary systems and could help you a lot in certain sectors. For example, we have great machinery know-how and knowledge of producing high-level food products in the agro-industrial field. We would also like to strengthen our bilateral relations in the infrastructure, aerospace, and defence industries, where we can undertake many important projects. The typical sector where we have always had very strong ties is machinery.

Strengthening our investments is essential now and in the forthcoming years. We know very well that you have strengths, such as the high level of education of the people, plenty of resources, and huge potential, not only in the agro-industrial field but also in the information technology, metallurgical, mining, and steel sectors, in the rare earth elements and all that sort of things.

Another sector where we see a vast potential for bilateral relations is the energy sector, including renewable energy, where Italy is quite experienced. However, to be frank, because of the war many Italian companies still maintain a wait-and-see attitude. Nevertheless, the conference, which took place in Berlin this year, will be held in Rome in 2025, and I hope it will be meaningful. For example, there is plenty of room to develop our bilateral relationship in the infrastructure sector. Italy is also very interested in logistics — ports, roads, and railways. There are many, many spheres where we could work together.

The situation regarding bilateral trade is good; in general, the volume is increasing. Honestly speaking, this also depends a lot on the war. Some companies have been present for many years, especially in the field of machinery. One, for example, is Camozzi, and the other is Mapei, a producer of building and construction materials. I expect more in the coming years, namely strengthening our investments in Ukraine.

— *Having arrived in Ukraine in 2021, you witnessed the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. Could you please tell us how Italian diplomacy contributed to supporting Ukraine during the great war? What lessons have you drawn for the future of Italian-Ukrainian relations?*

— Italy was among the European countries that hoped until the last moment that there would be no war. As you know, Anglo-Saxon countries told us there would be a war. Personally speaking, I was pretty pessimistic and worried because I was watching Russian TV and observing this propaganda machine all the time, as I know the language. Russia was preparing its public about the fact that Ukrainians are Russophobes, and it was necessary to 'de-Nazify' them. This outlook was also cemented by Putin's essay published in July 2021, in which he

asserted that Ukraine does not exist and that it is part of the Russian motherland. At that time, Putin's ideology was clear. However, conveying this message to Italy and explaining this absurdity was complicated. Not only Italy but other European countries underestimated this deep sense of humiliation, revanchism, resentment of the Russian special forces and former KGB (Committee for State Security), and the desire to recreate the Russian Empire.

I also worked in Russia from 2002 to 2006, and back then, I never would have imagined that there would be a war in 20 years. Living in the Russian capital at the time, I already observed this sense of superiority, especially of people in Moscow, towards Ukrainians, whom they derogatorily referred to as *khokhly* or *Little Russians*. Nevertheless, now everything has changed. In my view, Putin will go down in history as a tsar who lost Ukraine forever and made a huge mistake.

I also had an experience working in Ukraine from 1999 to 2002. After 20 years, I have seen a substantial rise of the national identity, which cannot be said about Ukraine 25 years ago. The first thing I noticed was that people, especially in the Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine, still speak Russian but feel Ukrainian. Especially when we talk about young people, their way of thinking is entirely Western, as it was not like that 20 or 25 years ago.

Meanwhile, there were two revolutions in Ukraine: the Revolution of Dignity and the Orange Revolution; the Orthodox Church of Ukraine received the Tomos of Autocephaly, and Ukraine signed an agreement with the European Union on visa-free travel. Many things have changed, especially after 2014, and this has been completely underestimated and denied by the Russian regime.

After the outbreak of the war, the Italian Embassy had the most challenging and dramatic period. Although we have written letters to our citizens warning them to pay attention and leave the country, 90% of 2,000 Italians in Ukraine did not believe. For most Italians, it came as a shock, and the Embassy's team had to organise the evacuation of a hundred people. Many Italians asked for our support. For 10 days, over 200 people, including newborns, took shelter in my residence. But I am very proud and feel privileged to serve as an Ambassador during this time because I have lived through history and witnessed these significant events.

Italian Embassy was one of the few that had never left Ukrainian territory. I moved from Kyiv to Lviv for one month. Actually, Italy and France were the only two G7 countries that stayed in Ukraine, and then we returned to Kyiv on the same day in the middle of April 2022. It was a nice and friendly competition, although the atmosphere was gloomy overall.

The reaction was very fast, mainly thanks to our former Prime Minister Mario Draghi. Italy's foreign policy changed immediately in 24 hours. It was a shock, and from that moment on, Italy has provided full support in the political,

economic, military and humanitarian fields. For example, we have been very effective in the field of sanctions. We froze assets, including Russian yachts and villas in Italy, worth more than 2 billion.

Moreover, we have significantly reduced our gas imports in a very short period. Previously, we imported 45% of our gas from Russia. This figure has now fallen to 2%, and we will be completely independent this year. Our current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, has confirmed and continued the same policy. Today, Italy is one of Ukraine's closest allies, and nothing will change it. There will be no elections in Italy in the near future; therefore, you can count on our strong support. You saw it during the G7 Italian presidency, where we reaffirmed Ukraine as a priority. I have received many calls from high-ranking Ukrainian government members and officials who greatly thanked us for our support.

As you know, the most important result of the G7 summit (13–15 June 2024) was the agreement to allocate \$50 billion to Ukraine aid derived from frozen Russian assets. It is a lot of money. I think this was a significant result. Moreover, at the final declaration of the G7 summit, you will see that the G7 members under the Italian presidency confirmed strong and steadfast support for Ukraine in all fields. My country has done an excellent job. We are very proud of this and will continue to do so. Our bilateral relations are excellent, and there is nothing to worry about.

— *As you conclude your mission in Ukraine, despite the challenges of working in a country fighting for its freedom, what positive impressions will you take away with you upon your return home?*

— I admire your resilience and fight for freedom. You have a lot to teach Western Europeans because we take freedom for granted. And you are ready to fight for freedom. In my opinion, freedom is the only value that gives dignity to a human being. If you are not free, you are a slave. It is the greatest lesson I have learned.

It always reminds me of the most beautiful pages of the Italian Risorgimento (unification of Italy), which took place when there was a small minority of Italians who built the Italian nation, and they died. For example, our national anthem was written by a 21-year-old guy, and he died. He wrote this national hymn in 2–3 hours.

Ukrainians deserve to be part of the European family because you understand the value of freedom. Of course, you are not perfect. Strengthening your judicial system and the rule of law takes time because I see corruption more as a consequence of the absence of the rule of law. Unfortunately, it is not easy to get rid of the Soviet authoritarian past in one day. It will take time, but overall I am optimistic because I have seen the change in 20 years. Today, for example, you have a robust civil society. It was not the case 20 years ago. I also see other positive elements, such as the decline of the negative influence of the oligarchs. However, of course, you must keep an eye on it and ensure these improvements continue.



«Diplomatic Football Cup 2024»: футбольний турнір за участю Посольства Італійської Республіки в Україні, ДП «ГДІП» та ФК «Полісся», 26 травня 2024 р.

Diplomatic Football Cup 2024: a football tournament with the participation of the Embassy of the Italian Republic in Ukraine, the GDIP, and the Polissia FC, 26 May 2024

In my view, strengthening and balancing the judicial system along with strong independent media will help you attract investments because they need a favourable business climate. Secondly, it will also be in your interest when you become a member of the European Union. Then you will do your best and use your huge potential. You are hardworking people; you are intelligent. Nevertheless, you need the rule of law. From my experiences in Africa and Asia, where I have observed corruption, I realised that it acts like a kind of cancer. You cannot develop your skills if the system is not based on meritocracy.

Therefore, it is in your interest. We are helping you, including through initiatives within the G7. It is true that some parts of Ukrainian society still resist these changes. However, transformation is a gradual process. You cannot change the system in one day. That is my perspective.

Interview dated 25 June 2024