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DIALOGUE BETWEEN UKRAINE AND THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

— Ukraine seeks to develop closer ties with African states, including the Republic of South Africa, as seen from high-level meetings and talks. Your Excellency, how has the full-scale russian invasion of Ukraine influenced the bilateral relations between Ukraine and South Africa, and where does their current level stand?

— The February 2022 full-scale russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape and had a noticeable impact on the dynamics of international relations, not without affecting the relations of Ukraine and the Republic of South Africa.

The countries of the African continent comprise 25% of the votes at the UN, playing a crucial role at a time when Ukraine finds itself at the epicentre of the events testing the global order. Throughout the war, Ukrainian diplomacy has sought to convey its position as clearly and broadly as possible, forging partnerships with all countries, especially the Republic of South Africa, an influential African state.

Facts speak louder than words, clearly showing how our bilateral relations have evolved. In June 2023, the African Peace Initiative entailed South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's **first** visit to Ukraine; on 24 April 2025, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy paid an official visit to South Africa — the **first** such visit in the 33 years of our diplomatic relations. In 2023, the Ukrainian foreign minister visited South Africa for the **first** time since 1998.

Since then, Minister Andrii Sybiha has visited South Africa twice, proving that there is now a regular dialogue between Ukraine and South Africa maintained at different levels and taking on various shapes. Both sides show openness to discussing complex issues, keenness to search for collaborative solutions, and willingness to support constructive interaction.



Візит лідерів африканських держав до Києва 16 червня 2023 року
Visit of leaders of African states to Kyiv on 16 June 2023

Ukraine and South Africa share many economic, political, and security interests. What's even more important these days is that we share common principles. Our countries declare respect for international law and the territorial integrity of states, as well as the importance of democracy and the protection of human rights.

— In 2023, a delegation of African leaders, including the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, visited Ukraine and Russia with their peace plan proposal. However, during his visit to China in September 2024, the South African president announced the country's support for the Chinese-Brazilian peace plan. Meanwhile, the country has also joined the Peace Formula. What is South Africa's current position on ending the Russian war against Ukraine, and how does the Embassy promote the Peace Plan based on Ukrainian interests?

— The Republic of South Africa adheres to its position of non-alignment. It is also an important Ukrainian partner on the African continent, as proven when South Africa became the first African country the President of Ukraine visited during the full-scale invasion. Ukraine respects South Africa's position and encourages it to support us on the platforms and in a manner that South Africa deems appropriate: mainly humanitarian aid, human rights protection, and the mechanisms proposed under the Peace Formula.

President Cyril Ramaphosa is also open about his willingness to mediate the return of the forcibly deported Ukrainian children. In 2023, the President of South Africa personally called upon the Russian

dictator to return Ukrainian children. The government of South Africa joined the international mediation efforts, and the President of Ukraine delivered a list of 400 children's names during his visit to South Africa. We hope South Africa's brokerage will help us bring some of them back.

South Africa's position on the prospect of achieving a lasting and just peace in Ukraine is largely informed by its history and experience. After the release of Nelson Mandela, the country's first democratically elected president, who had spent 27 years of his life in political imprisonment, he immediately called for negotiations with no preconditions.

South Africa went through a dark era of apartheid, cruelty, and large-scale human rights violations. Despite that, the people of this strong country managed to go through difficult negotiations, embark on the path of democracy, and adopt a new constitution rooted in the principles of the rule of law, non-discrimination, democracy, and human rights.

Ukraine's situation is, by all means, different because Russian aggression is another country's military aggression against a sovereign Ukraine. However, we understand that South Africa wishes us to succeed in peaceful diplomacy efforts and find opportunities to deliver justice for the millions of victims through negotiations. Ukraine is ready for negotiations, yet the aggressor state is ignoring them. Pretoria consistently insists that diplomacy, inclusive dialogue, and respect for and observance of international law present the only path towards ending the war. As the Embassy of Ukraine, we constantly inform representatives of South Africa's government, public, and analytical community about the Ukrainian vision for a just peace in Ukraine.

Our goal is to communicate the Ukrainian position to the broadest possible number of South African people. That is why we are using all possible platforms to familiarise South Africans with Ukraine and all the efforts made to achieve peace. We are not just talking to representatives of the government and the parliament; we are also actively engaging with the media, think tanks, and NGO platforms. Since the start of 2025, the Embassy has already had meetings across four South African provinces: Eastern and Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng. We must visit the provinces to talk to local authorities, businesses, researchers, and media representatives. The Embassy aims to facilitate new contacts between Ukrainian and South African civil societies and entrepreneurs.

For example, South Africa has a vast Network of Women Mediators. It consists of specialists who are very familiar with the pain Ukraine is going through and know how to explain the problems Ukraine faces to their officials. We are helping them establish contact with Ukrainian civic initiatives in this field to enable Ukrainian human rights workers and other activists to communicate directly with their South African counterparts. In addition, in 2025, there have already been three large events involving representatives of Ukrainian and South African businesses, one of which concerned defence technology. When our entrepreneurs enter South Africa's market, along with them come the stories of real people who continue doing business amidst the war. At times, contacts and human stories like this have a stronger effect than any presentation a Ukrainian Ambassador can give. The more such communication occurs between Ukrainians and South Africans, the more South Africa will contribute to supporting Ukraine in this difficult period.

— *As a consequence of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, numerous sanction packages have been put in place against Russia, yet cooperation under BRICS helps the country avoid international isolation and keep its economy afloat. What steps does the Embassy take to convey the Ukrainian point of view on the importance of diplomatic pressure against Russia?*

— In 2023, the Republic of South Africa hosted the BRICS Summit, and the Russian dictator planned to arrive in the country to participate in it. Yet that visit failed to happen, which sent an important signal: despite South Africa's membership in this economic bloc, the country is not willing to compromise on its obligations under international law.

We also draw on South Africa's experience, as economic sanctions actually contributed to the end of apartheid. Yes, in that case, they were implemented at the level of the UN, not by individual countries. The fact that Russia has veto power and obstructs international aggression prevention mechanisms opens up opportunities for Ukraine and South Africa to work together on finding a way to reform the UN. The President of Ukraine has repeatedly pointed out the necessity of such a reform, and so have, for decades, the continent's representatives and the African Union. It's an area where our countries' interests align and we can act together.

The goal of Ukrainian diplomacy is to persuade, not coerce. Thanks to our partnership with the South African public, which values justice and human rights, we trust that our message will garner a response.

— In 2025, South Africa, the only African country in the Group of Twenty, took over the G20 Presidency. What are the priorities on the G20 agenda for the duration of South Africa's presidency? How does South Africa plan to advocate for the necessity of guaranteeing Africa's food security through means such as the Grain From Ukraine initiative?

— Indeed, South Africa became the first African country to assume the presidency in the Group of Twenty, acquiring a unique opportunity to bring issues of crucial importance for the entire continent to the fore of the global agenda.

The presidency's officially set priorities include solidarity, justice, and sustainable development. Industrialisation and growth are key themes for African countries, of course, considering their young populations. South Africa mainly focuses on expanding access to funding through reforming such international financial institutions as the World Bank and the IMF, attracting investments in infrastructure, particularly energy, transport, and digitalisation, countering climate change, and promoting just energy transition with proper account for the interests of the countries dependent on fossil fuels.

Food security remains highly relevant to the African region. One of the first tangible steps South Africa initiated was to create the G20 Agriculture Working Group.

Most of the issues South Africa addresses at the G20 cannot be resolved without Ukraine, so it is important that Ukrainian representatives and experts are involved in all appropriate initiatives and discussions. Beyond food security, we have also discussed Ukraine's participation in the Task Force on Artificial Intelligence, Data Governance, and Innovation for Sustainable Development. Ukrainian experience, especially where it concerns food security, introduction of innovations amidst a military crisis, digital transformation, and protection of critical infrastructure, is a valuable element of the global knowledge exchange processes, which is potentially vital to actually resolving the challenges we all face.

An example: The Grain From Ukraine initiative has already proven its effectiveness as a humanitarian tool used to aid the countries that have suffered the most from the global food crisis. This mechanism could potentially be integrated within the broader G20 framework. The Embassy is working on ensuring this initiative gets presented adequately to the experts and covered in the media as an example of impactful international cooperation that makes a real difference for

the humanitarian situation. We believe that models like this one can supplement the G20 agenda, giving it a practical, people-oriented dimension.

— *Ukraine and South Africa enjoy growing economic cooperation, especially in agriculture, food industry, mining, mechanical engineering, and IT. What measures could promote an even more active trade dynamic between Ukraine and South Africa?*

— For there to be economic cooperation, there first needs to exist a mutual interest. Despite the full-scale invasion, the last three years have shown increasing interest in Ukraine among South Africans.

Next, there must be real mechanisms for cooperation and harmonisation of regulations. In this area, we have managed to make some progress, not least thanks to the visits to South Africa by Yuliia Svyrydenko, First Deputy Prime Minister / Minister of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine (2021–25), and Vitalii Koval, Minister of Agrarian Policy and Food, which occurred alongside the official visit of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Ukrainian ministers had bilateral meetings with their South African counterparts from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Competition. As a result, they reached practical arrangements towards signing bilateral agreements in agrarian cooperation and creating the Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation. This will lay institutional groundwork for a continuous dialogue between both countries' governments and business circles. The economic part of the visit entailed meetings of Ukrainian entrepreneurs with representatives of top business structures and associations of South Africa at the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce and Industry. By giving entrepreneurs a chance to speak directly to government representatives and learn about the mechanisms of cooperation and how the Ukrainian government supports entrepreneurs and attracts investors despite the war, we build trust and set mutual expectations.

Our trade and economic ties will continue to deepen thanks to our efforts to strengthen the institutional groundwork underpinning the cooperation, share experience, regularly hold bilateral business forums, and consistently communicate investment opportunities. On top of the regulatory and institutional foundation, it is also important for our products to enjoy interest in the other country's market and access logistical routes. Without a doubt, we can improve our success in this by familiarising Ukrainian entrepreneurs with the requirements of the



Зустріч Любові Абравітової з представниками бізнес-палати Нельсон Мандела Бей
Meeting between Liubov Abravитova and representatives of the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber

South African market and the specificity of the local market and consumption patterns. Ukraine is keen on expanding its presence across African markets and prioritises this area in its foreign economic policy.

— In light of russia's active information policy in the African region, what strategies can Ukraine employ to counter disinformation effectively? What do you think are the main challenges Ukraine faces in communicating its position to the people of the Republic of South Africa?

— In 2023, Ukraine adopted the first Ukraine–Africa communication strategy for 2024–26. This means that our information policy efforts are not sporadic measures but rather well-coordinated actions of the entire MFA team and our partners.

The society in South Africa, as is generally the case in African countries, is very sensitive to the subject of colonialism, and the Ukrainian experience most certainly deeply resonates with the population, even though these countries face more than enough daily challenges of their own. We adapt our approach to communication by emphasising that the Ukrainian resistance means not just the protection of territory but also the fight for freedom, dignity, and the right of sovereign existence. This narrative thoroughly echoes the experience of national liberation

movements of African peoples, and so we are steadily conveying this parallel to our African audiences. Our main objective is not just to tell them about the consequences of the russian aggression but, more importantly, to connect Ukraine and the South Africans. Ukrainian culture is our essential weapon in the fight against russian narratives. Ukrainian traditional clothes, the art of egg painting, and modern digitalised exhibitions about the Holodomor allow South Africans to discover the Ukrainian experience, explore our identity, and improve their understanding of the nature of russian colonialism. Such events often prove more effective than any explanations or narratives. We use the soft power of documentaries, literature, and photo exhibitions to show the links and continuity behind the russian aggression, from Holodomor to the destruction of Mariupol. This is what creative projects like Maryna Tkachuk's film *Family Album* and Yuliia Fedorovych's exhibition *Unpunished Evil: HØLØDØMØR & Russia's Modern-Day Crimes in Ukraine* are about.

Ukrainian artists' regular visits to South Africa are integral to this. For example, they participate in key cultural events like 'Time of the Writer' and 'Poetry Africa'. Those platforms allow them to spread the truth to a broad audience through the language of art and human stories.

Another important mission is served by South African journalists' visits to Ukraine, during which they have an opportunity to personally explore the reality of war and better understand the daily Ukrainian experience. South Africa has an extensive network of independent media that has a major influence on shaping public opinion. The Embassy of Ukraine actively cooperates with the local media, offering our assistance in covering events and immediate access to verified information. I'm always open to commentary and interviews. Such interactions through interviews, briefings, participation in public debates, or answers to journalists' questions build a direct and trusted communication channel with the South African society.

We pay special attention to working with universities and think tanks. Explaining the nature of the russian aggression, the principles of international law, and the humanitarian consequences of the war is an indispensable element of our expert diplomacy and scientific and academic diplomacy.

The role of the Ukrainian community is just as impactful. We actively involve the Ukrainians in counter-disinformation activities. This allows us to reach beyond the official level and amplify the Ukrainian

voice in civil society, where personal accounts and initiatives can build trust and form emotional connections with the local communities.

We still face a series of challenges, of course. One of the biggest among them is the overpowering presence of russian propaganda outlets in South Africa's information space, including *RT*, *Sputnik*, and resources affiliated with them. Another challenge stems from the limited knowledge about Ukraine, especially among the groups that used to be under the influence of the Soviet and post-Soviet perception of history. Russia actively exploits the Soviet legacy, presenting itself as the sole successor to its policy of supporting African liberation movements.

However, even in these circumstances, Ukraine has demonstrated that effective work is still possible. The Embassy's initiative to install two memorial plaques on the Wall of Remembrance within the Freedom Park Heritage Site in Pretoria was a perfect example. Created upon the initiative of Nelson Mandela, the memorial is a sacred place for South Africa, where the people can honour the memory of freedom fighters. Our memorial plaques are dedicated to Ukrainian diplomats Hennadii Udoenko and Volodymyr Kravets, who represented the Ukrainian SSR at the UN and served as vice-chairmen of the Special UN Committee Against Apartheid. More than a gesture of commemoration, it was a recovery of the historical truth about Ukraine's actual contribution to South Africa's struggle for freedom. For the first time in history, President Cyril Ramaphosa publicly expressed gratitude to Ukraine for its support during South Africa's fight against apartheid when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited South Africa on 24 April 2025. It was an important shift in rhetoric, which proved that Moscow had lost its monopoly on the historical legacy of international solidarity in the fight against racial discrimination. This position is more than symbolic. It has strategic significance in restoring historical justice and changing the perception of the continuity and importance of Ukrainian–South African relations.

— In October 2024, Pretoria hosted a conference on the protection of the rights of Ukrainian children, initiated by you in the framework of the #BringKidsBackUA programme. What are the Embassy's next steps in the context of drawing the attention of South Africa's authorities and public to Russia's crimes in the war against Ukraine?

— It was essential to organise that conference, which was one of several events on this topic. In 2024, we had a large conference concerning the return of children, which was attended by the third president



Любов Абравітова на симпозіумі з питань захисту прав українських дітей
Liubov Abravitova at a symposium regarding the protection of the rights of Ukrainian children

of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, during which 13 South African NGOs signed the statement urging the return of the children. Under the #BringKidsBackUA initiative, Head of the Office of the President, Andrii Yermak, and the Director of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, Helena Kennedy, involved South African experts, human rights activists, and journalists in online meetings and presentations of documents concerning the return of deported children on many occasions.

The Embassy was not the sole organiser of the conference, of course. South Africa has an initiative created in 2023 by the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, and the Ukrainian Association of South Africa, which allowed Ukrainian and South African specialists to work together on three subjects: reformation of the UN, nuclear safety, and the return of forcibly deported children. Therefore, the main speakers at the conference were South African and Ukrainian experts involved in researching the subject of children's return and the relevant mechanisms at the disposal of African countries. Unfortunately, the continent has suffered many tragedies in recent decades. There is much experience of children's return, reintegration, search, and identification, as well as implementation of liability mechanisms, including the decisions of the International Criminal Court. Events like these are not just to show solidarity but also to share real expertise. I would like to thank Kateryna Rashavska from the Regional Centre for Human Rights and Oleksandra Matviichuk and Oleksandra Romantsova from the Center for Civil Liberties, who have consistently cooperated with South African organisations and media, and of course, the Ukrainian Association of South Africa, which effectively coordinates such cooperation and dialogue between NGOs locally.

Recently, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa met with US President Donald Trump, and even during that meeting, where there were no representatives of Ukraine, the two presidents mentioned important things about the necessity of bringing back the Ukrainian children. We really hope that we will soon see the return of the 400 children whose names the President of Ukraine passed to South African partners. The protection of children is an issue that is unaffected by geographical or political boundaries. We appeal to universal concepts: human dignity, responsibility to the next generation, and the common fight against impunity. We really appreciate finding South African partners who share our sensitivity to this.

— *Your Excellency, please tell us about the Embassy's public diplomacy projects and the Ukrainian Association of South Africa's role in improving local knowledge about our country.*

— Ukraine's public diplomacy is no longer just a soft power tool; today, it's also an element of our national security. In a world characterised by an ongoing information war, it's not enough for us to just talk about Ukraine: we must make sure that we are heard, clearly understood, and recognisable. This work must have a long-term perspective: instead of just reacting, we create a lasting Ukrainian cultural product. As part of the initiatives of Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska, we opened the Ukrainian bookshelf at the Central Library of Cape Town and launched the Ukrainian-language audio guide at the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. It is symbolic that this was the 100th audio guide created within our international cultural diplomacy programme. We also focus separately on cooperating with South Africa's universities and think tanks through the First Lady's initiative called the Global Initiative for Ukrainian Studies. It allowed us to establish cooperation with the country's top universities, including the University of Pretoria and the University of Witwatersrand. We talk about Ukraine in the language of academia, through the lens of international law, history, politics, and global challenges. We gradually decolonise the academic discourse and give Ukraine visibility in a space once dominated by warped or oversimplified representations.

Our efforts are bolstered by the involvement of the Ukrainian Institute, which expanded the scope of its operations after the full-scale invasion to include the African continent. Even though the Ukrainian Institute has not yet established a permanent presence in the Republic of South Africa, it's important to note that cooperation with South



Український криголам «Ноосфера», який через російське вторгнення в Україну базується в південноафриканському порту Кейптауна

The Ukrainian icebreaker Noosfera, which is based in the South African port of Cape Town due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

African artists is already actively growing, opening new opportunities for cultural dialogue and mutual discovery. However, when discussing cultural diplomacy initiatives, we must mention the vital role of the Ukrainian Association of South Africa (UAZA), which has been active since 2017. It's an independent non-profit NGO registered in South Africa that has brought together Ukrainians and South Africans interested in developing Ukrainian–South African ties. The UAZA is Ukraine's authentic 'human face' in South Africa. Moreover, it is a reliable bridge connecting cooperation across the academic, cultural, and public spheres. For example, UAZA members translated and voice-overed the Ukrainian-language audio guide at the Apartheid Museum. They also ensured the opening of the Ukrainian bookshelf and have since kept expanding its contents. The organisation is represented in South Africa's largest cities: Pretoria, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Gqeberha, which enables it to constantly organise charity activities, cultural events, information campaigns, and analytical

discussions in different parts of such a large country as South Africa. After all, South Africa's territory is twice the size of Ukraine, while our diplomatic mission so far is only present in Pretoria. The UAZA has a permanent Sunday school, where children study the Ukrainian language and learn about Ukrainian traditions.

The UAZA also closely cooperates with South Africa's human rights organisations, participates in public discussions about the Russian Federation's crimes, and promotes the supply of humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

I have mentioned the initiative with the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, and the UAZA. This platform has allowed us to prepare the three analytical reports presented in Accra during the African Union's Mid-Year Coordination Meeting in July 2024.

Regular peace rallies, advocacy events, information campaigns, and work in the information space comprise a very important component of public diplomacy. Here, the Embassy and its team act in synergy, bolstering one another and developing our piece of Ukraine's world in the African continent.



Приготування борщу на телеканалі «Soweto TV»
Cooking borscht on the Soweto TV channel

Interview dated 18 July 2025