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## **A COUNTRY WITH A COMPLEX HISTORY AND A PROMISING PRESENT**

— *Your Excellency, could you please outline the current state and priority areas in the development of Ukraine-Montenegro relations?*

— The relations between Ukraine and Montenegro have traditionally been friendly and constructive. Montenegro has expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine both after the beginning of russian aggression in 2014 and since the full-scale invasion in 2022. Given its limited practical capacity as a small state, Montenegro has nevertheless stood by Ukraine in all possible areas. It joined the EU's sanctions against russia as early as 2014 and, since February 2022, has consistently provided Ukraine with political support on all international platforms, as well as military, technical and humanitarian assistance. At present, Montenegro fully aligns its foreign and security policy with the EU's common stance, including sanctions.

At the same time, Montenegro extended a particularly warm welcome to numerous Ukrainian citizens who were forced to flee their homes due to russia's armed aggression and occupation, granting them temporary protection and continuing to prolong this status annually. Moreover, at a particular moment in 2022, Montenegro hosted the highest number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe relative to its population (approximately 5%). Currently, over 8,000 Ukrainians reside in the country.

We are actively and consistently advancing intergovernmental cooperation between Ukraine and Montenegro, including in the areas of security, European integration, economy, tourism, and humanitarian support. In particular, further expansion of the legal framework between our countries in the spheres mentioned earlier is expected. Despite the ongoing war, trade between Ukraine and Montenegro has



Зустріч Посла України з віцепредседом Парламенту Чорногорії та головою парламентської групи дружби з Україною Ніколою Цамаєм. Травень 2025 року

Meeting between the Ambassador of Ukraine and Nikolla Camaj, Vice President of the Parliament of Montenegro and Head of the Parliamentary Friendship Group with Ukraine. May 2025

been growing in recent years. Even in the absence of direct air travel (for obvious reasons), Ukrainian tourists continue to visit Montenegro. We also look forward to increased trade and to welcoming Montenegrin tourists to Ukraine after the war ends.

— *In September 2024, the Dobra Sprava Ukrainian Association became an associate member of the Ukrainian World Congress. Mr Ambassador, how do you assess the significance of such recognition for the Ukrainian community in Montenegro and its international representation?*

— This is an important achievement that demonstrates the maturity of our local community, even though it's still quite young age-wise. Such recognition not only increases the representation of Ukrainians in Montenegro on the world stage but also opens new horizons for projects, educational and cultural initiatives, and support for Ukraine's defenders.

The only registered Ukrainian civil society organisation in Montenegro is the Dobra Sprava Ukrainian Association, established in spring 2022. Cooperation between the Embassy and the community has remained consistently strong. Together, we have carried out numerous events and projects, primarily humanitarian, cultural, and educational.

We also enjoy personally warm relations with the Association's leadership. Our diplomatic mission played a constructive and active role in supporting the community's organisational establishment and legal registration in the first half of 2022.

It is important to understand that, unlike some neighbouring countries in Southeast Europe, Montenegro does not have a historically constituted Ukrainian diaspora. Before 24 February 2022, just over 2,000 Ukrainians lived here. However, with the onset of Russia's full-scale armed invasion of Ukraine, our community grew significantly due to the arrival of forcibly displaced persons. The wartime challenges prompted local Ukrainians to consolidate and formalise their status. We highly appreciate the dedication, enthusiasm, and patriotism of the Ukrainian community in Montenegro.

*— Organising recreational trips to Montenegro for the children of Ukraine's defenders has become an important initiative of the Dobra Sprava Association. Are there intentions to expand such programmes or introduce new projects?*

— Yes, this practice has become regular. The Embassy, the Dobra Sprava Ukrainian Association, and the Honorary Consuls of Montenegro in Kharkiv and Odesa, as well as other donors, are working actively to ensure that as many Ukrainian children as possible, especially those from frontline areas and children of Ukrainian defenders, can at least temporarily escape the harsh realities of war and constant stress by enjoying the natural beauty and hospitality of friendly Montenegro. In cooperation with Montenegrin partners and with the support of donor funding, a new programme is being prepared for 2025, offering health recovery for Ukrainian children from vulnerable backgrounds and children of defenders. In addition, the programme is expected to include psychosocial support, as well as educational and cultural components.

Children's recreation and leisure is one of the practical areas where Montenegro, despite being a net recipient of international financial and technical aid, can offer active assistance and support to Ukraine.

*— The Embassy of Ukraine in Montenegro and the Ukrainian community have organised a wide range of public diplomacy events, including film screenings, photo exhibitions, charity festivals, and social initiatives. Could you highlight the most notable among them? How would you assess the impact of these efforts in garnering support for Ukraine abroad?*

— Public diplomacy has been and will remain one of the core priorities of the Embassy's work. Over the past few years, we have developed

a solid track record with many successful cases in this area. The overarching goal of all such initiatives is to strengthen Ukraine's positive image during this extremely challenging time for our nation, to maintain solidarity and support from Montenegro and its citizens, and to counter russian anti-Ukrainian narratives and propaganda, which, in one way or another, seek to infiltrate the public discourse in nearly every country. We have organised screenings of various Ukrainian fictional and documentary films, including *20 Days in Mariupol*, *The Hardest Hour*, and *Culture vs War*; held photography exhibitions, charity evenings, and concerts. The target audience of these events is primarily foreigners: Montenegrins and diplomats from other countries.

Traditionally, the Embassy, the Ukrainian community, and local Montenegrin activists organise marches and other public events in support of Ukraine to mark Ukraine's Independence Day and the anniversary of russia's full-scale invasion.

As for the large-scale public diplomacy initiatives, I would like to highlight the Days of Ukraine in Montenegro charity festival, which took place on 25–26 June 2022 in Cetinje, the historical capital of Montenegro, as well as the Ukrainiada festival, held three times in 2024–25 in the Herceg Novi Municipality. The role and significance of the local Ukrainian community in making these events possible cannot be overstated. Each initiative garners considerable attention not only from Ukrainians living in Montenegro and neighbouring countries but also from Montenegrins and foreign tourists.

The impact of the outlined initiatives is undoubtedly positive, and the response from the local public is consistently friendly. Thus, we have many more similar projects in the pipeline.

— *In July 2024, the Government of Montenegro banned russian propaganda media outlets such as Sputnik, RT, and Tsargrad. Mr Ambassador, how has this decision affected the Montenegrin information space? Have hostile narratives disappeared or merely changed their form and channels of dissemination?*

— The list you mentioned is not quite complete. In fact, there are many more such media outlets, and the restrictions were not introduced as a one-off measure. This bold and important decision is fully aligned with Montenegro's foreign and security policy, which, as I have already noted, is currently in complete sync with the European Union's course. As we know, Montenegro remains a regional leader in European integration, and the current government considers its priority goal

to acquire full EU membership in the coming years. According to recent public opinion polls, support for joining the Union among Montenegrin citizens remains extremely high (over 80%).

However, it should be borne in mind that despite the blocking of russian propaganda channels and other efforts taken by the government, numerous ways of russian informational influence remain active. These means include social media platforms, several portals not officially registered in Montenegro, and some media outlets from neighbouring countries in the region that often relay russian narratives without scrutiny and, at times, even deliberately. Unfortunately, there are also local supporters of putin and russian aggression, as well as individuals and organisations that openly express pro-russian sentiments. We have witnessed targeted information campaigns orchestrated from moscow through agents of influence.

But in general, Montenegro's information space appears fairly balanced from the perspective of Ukraine's national interests. Free media, freedom of speech, and other attributes of a democratic society are developed and legally safeguarded. The non-governmental sector in Montenegro is particularly enthusiastic, vigorous, and engaged. NGOs contribute to disseminating the truth about russian aggression and the numerous crimes being committed by the invaders on Ukrainian soil. They also support efforts aimed at raising awareness about russia's harmful influence in the country and the region, as well as the channels through which russian disinformation and narratives spread.

We should remember that Montenegro is a young democracy. For this reason, international organisations, primarily the EU, also carry out enormous work and closely monitor compliance with European principles and standards in the field of media, regularly providing relevant guidance, conducting training programmes, and supporting free media.

As a small country, Montenegro is aware of its present vulnerabilities and the dangers arising from today's geopolitical realities. The people here remember their history, preserve their national identity, and strengthen their country's security. That is precisely why Montenegro joined NATO. But beyond that, Montenegrins are acutely aware of the risks posed by insufficient attention to countering various external destructive information influences. Efforts in this area remain active and intense.



*— Your public engagement also plays a notable role in countering dis-information. You regularly give interviews to Montenegrin media and publish your columns. How does the local press respond to your materials? Does this proactive approach help convey the truth about the war and Ukraine's position?*

— In most cases, yes. I am regularly interviewed by Montenegrin newspapers and TV channels and write articles as a columnist. Ukraine enjoys strong public trust, and our voice is clearly heard in the media. The local press tends to be constructive, and many journalists genuinely seek to understand the essence of what is happening.

Speaking of all the major media outlets in Montenegro, they have either a friendly or friendly-neutral stance towards Ukraine and have not been involved in spreading anti-Ukrainian propaganda. The country's leading media cover the Russian-Ukrainian war with a fairly balanced and objective approach.

The Embassy maintains constructive and generally friendly relations with all major Montenegrin media outlets.

*— Intercity and interregional cooperation represents an important dimension of bilateral relations. One example of such engagement is the partnership between Cetinje and Kharkiv. In your view, which formats of this cooperation are proving most effective? Do you see scope for its further strengthening and expansion?*

— Interregional collaboration offers tremendous potential. It allows communities to establish direct contacts, share knowledge, and enhance humanitarian cooperation.

A vivid example is, of course, the cooperation you mentioned between the cities of Cetinje and Kharkiv. Their interaction is regular and active. I would like to highlight a photo exhibition organised by the Ukrainian side in Cetinje in July 2024, which focused on the realities of daily life in wartime Kharkiv. The event generated considerable interest among the local population. We are also working on involving Cetinje in the aforementioned regular health and recreation programmes for Ukrainian children in Montenegro.

It is worth emphasising that Cetinje, the historical and cultural capital of Montenegro, is the country's most Ukraine-friendly municipality. This applies both to the local authorities and to the city's residents. Notably, during the first 100 days of Russia's full-scale invasion, daily pro-Ukrainian marches took place in Cetinje — a practice that has since continued on a monthly basis.



Святування річниці з дня народження Тараса Шевченка. Подгориця, 9 березня 2025 року  
 Celebration of Taras Shevchenko's birthday. Podgorica, 9 March 2025

In addition, the Embassy is working on new initiatives aimed at establishing and developing interregional cooperation between Ukraine and Montenegro, in particular, with the coastal municipalities of Herceg Novi and Bar, the country's maritime gateway. It is evident that once the current war ends, cooperation between Ukrainian and Montenegrin cities will further intensify.

— *Since June 2024, a transport visa-free regime for freight has been in effect between Ukraine and Montenegro. How has this liberalisation affected trade volumes?*

— Since the introduction of the transport visa-free regime, trade volumes have increased significantly. To be more precise, they have tripled. Logistics have become simpler and more efficient, and costs have decreased. This has considerably improved conditions for Ukrainian exporters and strengthened business ties with Montenegrin partners. We see this as a step towards deeper economic integration. The transport visa-free regime can rightly be considered one of the most tangible and practical achievements in the economic dimension of Ukraine-Montenegro relations.