

Ernal Filo,
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Republic of Albania to Ukraine

ALBANIA IS STANDING FIRMLY ALONGSIDE UKRAINE

— Your Excellency, please accept our congratulations on the opening of the Albanian Embassy in Ukraine — the first new Embassy to open since 24 February 2022 — as well as our gratitude for Albania's unwavering support for Ukraine since the first day of the full-scale russian invasion. Mr Ambassador, what were your first impressions of Ukraine and your experience establishing the new diplomatic mission so far?

— Thank you for your kind words. It is an honour for Albania to be represented in Ukraine at such a critical moment in history. My first impressions of Ukraine were of a nation demonstrating remarkable resilience, strength, and unwavering determination in the face of adversity. The courage of the Ukrainian people is truly inspiring, and their commitment to defending their sovereignty and democratic values resonates deeply with Albania. On the other hand, in the short time that I served as Ambassador, I have seen a very beautiful country with an old history, and I met with very loving and hospitable people. Overall, Ukraine is a great place with so many well-educated and smart people. From St Sophia of Kyiv to Independence Square, the city breathes in history and exhales modernity. Kyiv cannot help but leave an impression! Architecture, the rhythm of life during the war, places of strength and inspiration — everything here is filled with a special energy that does not allow either Kyiv residents or visitors to doubt the victory for a moment.

I can't fail to mention the immediate assistance of my colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and the GDIP in the first days of my arrival in the wonderful city of Kyiv. They helped me with the best possible accommodation and resolved many technicalities.

Establishing a new diplomatic mission amid ongoing conflict presented challenges, but our dedication to strengthening



Відкриття Посольства Албанії в Україні
Opening of the Embassy of Albania in Ukraine

Albania–Ukraine relations made every effort worthwhile. The warm reception from Ukrainian authorities and civil society reaffirmed the strong friendship between our nations. We see our presence in Kyiv as a testament to Albania's steadfast support for Ukraine's freedom, independence, and European future.

With the opening of the Embassy, Albania opens a new chapter in our partnership, a bridge between Tirana and Kyiv to work as closely as possible on achieving common goals.

— On 21 January 2025, Ukraine and Albania signed the Agreement on Security Cooperation and Long-Term Support. What new prospects has this agreement opened for our countries' cooperation?

— Albania, a NATO member, has condemned Russian aggression and imposed sanctions against Moscow for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. Tirana has also offered other assistance, including sheltering Ukrainian citizens.

In early 2024, Tirana hosted a summit on Ukraine, bringing together the leaders of six Western Balkan states and Moldova. This summit, which was held at the invitation of Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, was attended by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

This agreement marks a significant step forward in our bilateral relations. It provides a structured framework for security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and military-technical assistance.

Given Albania's NATO membership and Ukraine's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, we see this as an opportunity to enhance Ukraine's defence capabilities through joint training programmes, knowledge exchange, and logistical support.

Albania has provided military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since the full invasion began and will continue to support it during the 10-year period of the agreement. Albania will also contribute to the coalition of fighter jets.

Beyond military cooperation, the agreement also fosters strategic collaboration in cybersecurity, countering hybrid threats, and strengthening regional stability. It reflects Albania's firm commitment to stand with Ukraine not only in its immediate fight for sovereignty but also in its long-term security and stability.

— Throughout 2024, the Albanian Ministry of Defence announced and began implementing plans to rejuvenate the country's arms production industry and seek investors and partners to achieve that end. What can you tell us about the impact of this recent course on the cooperation between Ukrainian and Albanian military industry companies?

— Today, we are experiencing unique moments that encompass the entire globe, where attempts are being made to recreate new geo-strategic alliances. This has brought security to the forefront, requiring us to be as well-prepared as possible. One of the government's top priorities is to create a domestic defence manufacturing industry. Albania has the potential to develop this industry and become an exporter of military products within a decade. Our ambition is to create our own defence industry. We know very well how it was destroyed. Today, we have the conditions and opportunities to build an industry that within this decade will not only give us back a missing asset of Albania — the asset of this very industry — but also provide us with a new capacity for profit in financial terms to reinvest in the Armed Forces and the life of the country. Today, we have a team that has been built exactly for this. Not only will we invest in defence, but we will also get back what we have invested in by producing. We will be an exporting country of military products within this decade. This is the goal, and we are on the path to this reality, seeing how the discussions are going with the large international companies that have expressed interest in joining us in this new adventure. Our goal is to use defence to create an attractive base for young professionals who not only do not leave the country but also return from abroad.



Прем'єр-міністр Албанії Еді Рама та Президент України Володимир Зеленський
Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy

The modernisation of Albania's defence industry aligns with broader European security objectives, and Ukraine plays a key role in this transformation. Ukraine's extensive experience in defence production, particularly in armoured vehicles, artillery systems, and drone technology, makes it a valuable partner. We are working and building partnerships for a new military industry because that is what the times require of us, and the plans are to have a production base in Albania for tools, vehicles, weapons, and drones. As our Prime Minister, Mr Edi Rama, said, we are going to have the base in Albania.

Albanian and Ukrainian defence enterprises are already in discussions regarding joint production initiatives, technology transfer, and supply chain cooperation. Our defence industries can complement each other, particularly in producing ammunition and upgrading military equipment to NATO standards. Strengthening these ties will benefit both nations and contribute to regional security.

— Albania is making steady progress towards its eventual membership in the European Union, having recently commenced official accession negotiations and opened its first chapters. In March 2025, it was reported that Albania shared its negotiation experience from the 2023 screening process with Ukrainian officials. Please tell us more about the ways our two countries support one another in addressing the challenges we face on our shared European path.

— We foresee a two-year ratification period, which concludes in 2030 at the EU table. The plan is very clear. We want to conclude the negotiations successfully by 2027, and we are working every day to do this. We want to open all chapters within the year. There are no obstacles since the EU opened the door for the first time after many years, when it was closed. The door has really opened, and entry into the EU for common strategic interests is concrete. This is related to our work, which must not be interrupted. The EU passport is a consequence of EU membership. No one will stop us. On 11 May, we believe that we will get the necessary result to move this process forward because any fluctuation might bring consequences, which can be related to other dynamics, which could close the door again.

Tirana is preparing for the European Council Summit, to be held on 16 May, which will be attended by European Union leaders, as well as the President of Ukraine, Mr Volodymyr Zelenskyy. This summit is an important opportunity for Albania and a great display of appreciation for the country's role in the region. It is a great responsibility for Albania to host European leaders, and this event is an important moment for strengthening Albania's ties with the EU, a region that is becoming increasingly important for the European Union.

Albania firmly believes that Ukraine's rightful place is within the European Union. As a country navigating the accession process, we understand the complexities and challenges involved, and we are committed to sharing our experiences to help Ukraine progress efficiently.

Our government has already provided Ukrainian officials with insights into institutional reforms, anti-corruption measures, and alignment with the EU acquis. We are also fostering direct cooperation between our ministries and EU integration bodies to streamline the process. On 17 January 2025, in Kyiv, Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration and Minister of Justice, and Igli Hasani, Albania's Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, signed a Memorandum of Cooperation between Ukraine and the Republic of Albania, focusing on European integration and the EU accession process. The memorandum sets the stage for closer collaboration in the process, reflecting the ongoing negotiations of both nations towards full EU membership, and aims to strengthen cooperation in European integration. Key areas covered include sharing expertise in EU accession negotiations, implementing reforms in the rule of law, judicial reform, and anti-corruption

efforts, and advancing digital transformation, decarbonisation, and ecological initiatives.

Albania and Ukraine share a European vision, and together, we will work to overcome obstacles and advance towards full EU membership.

— Please tell us about the dynamics of the economic and commercial relations between our countries. What industries, goods, and services play important roles in this context?

— The political and diplomatic relations between the Republic of Albania and Ukraine are at the highest level, marked by strong mutual support and shared strategic goals. Now, it is time to unlock the full potential of our economic cooperation. The Embassy of Albania is actively working to strengthen commercial ties and facilitate business partnerships between our countries.

Before the war, key areas of trade included agriculture, energy, construction materials, and tourism. The volume of trade between Albania and Ukraine is approaching \$40 million. The basis of exports from Ukraine to Albania is made up of ferrous metals, cereals, fats, and oils, as well as tobacco; the main goods exported from Albania are vegetables, ferrous metals, nuts, and shoes. Meanwhile, indicators of cooperation in the field of tourism are increasing year by year.



Посол Албанії в Україні Ернал Філо та Міністр аграрної політики та продовольства України Віталій Коваль

Ambassador of Albania to Ukraine Ernal Filo and Minister of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine Vitalii Koval

However, the war has introduced significant challenges, disrupting supply chains and investment opportunities. Despite these difficulties, there is strong potential for growth in several sectors, particularly pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and food production. Albanian companies are increasingly interested in entering the Ukrainian market, and Ukrainian businesses see Albania as a gateway to the Western Balkans.

At the same time, bureaucratic complexities remain an obstacle to expanding trade and investment. The Embassy is working closely with both governments to address regulatory barriers, simplify trade procedures, and create more favourable conditions for business cooperation. We are confident that, through joint efforts, we will enhance economic collaboration to match the strength of our political partnership.

— In February 2025, Prime Minister of Ukraine Denys Shmyhal and Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama discussed further sanctions against Russia and measures to combat its 'shadow fleet' operations. What can you tell us about the prospects of these efforts?

— Albania has been a steadfast supporter of Ukraine since the very first days of this brutal and unjust war. Our position remains unwavering: Russia's aggression must be met with firm resistance, and we will continue to stand with Ukraine in every possible way.

Prime Minister Edi Rama has been a vocal advocate for Ukraine on the international stage, demonstrating strong leadership in ensuring that Albania remains at the forefront of European efforts to hold Russia accountable. His commitment to supporting Ukraine — both politically and practically — is reflected in Albania's proactive stance on sanctions enforcement.

During talks, both prime ministers emphasised the need for stronger measures against Russia's so-called 'shadow fleet,' which is being used to circumvent sanctions and finance the war. Albania is working closely with Ukraine and its partners to enhance maritime oversight, tighten enforcement mechanisms, and prevent sanctioned Russian entities from exploiting international loopholes.

This is not just a question of economic restrictions — it is a matter of justice and security. Albania will continue to play its part in ensuring that sanctions remain effective and that Ukraine receives the support it needs to prevail.

— Albanian authorities have repeatedly declared the country's readiness to participate in the Ukrainian reconstruction process. What plans

and projects have been developed in this context so far? Which regions and spheres of recovery are of most interest to Albania?

— Albania's commitment to Ukraine's recovery is not just a political stance — it is a matter of deep solidarity and historical friendship between our nations. From the very beginning of this war, Albania has stood with Ukraine, providing humanitarian assistance, sheltering refugees, and supporting reconstruction efforts.

On 6 March 2022, Russia's aggression hit close to home for us when its forces destroyed the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Albania in Kharkiv. This act of violence was not just an attack on a building but on the very symbol of Albanian-Ukrainian friendship. Yet, instead of weakening our resolve, it only strengthened our commitment to Ukraine's future.

Albania's support goes beyond words. In line with the Twinning Agreement between Tirana and Kharkiv, the Municipality of Tirana has already allocated funds to rebuild a school in the Kyivskyi District of Kharkiv. This project is just one of many that we hope to implement as part of Ukraine's post-war recovery. In the agreement, signed during the Davos World Economic Forum on 21 January, the Albanian side marks Kharkiv as a city of 'special interest' and promises to prioritise supporting Kharkiv's rebuilding.

Albania has also provided systematic humanitarian aid, both through direct financial contributions and indirect support. In the first months of the war, our country organised large-scale deliveries of essential supplies, ensuring that Ukrainians received food, medicine, and other necessities. At the same time, Albania welcomed Ukrainian refugees with open arms, offering them safety and hospitality — a gesture we continue to uphold.

As Ukraine moves towards rebuilding, Albania remains committed to playing an active role. Our focus is on education, infrastructure, and humanitarian projects, but we are also ready to explore further opportunities that will contribute to Ukraine's long-term stability and prosperity.

— What public diplomacy efforts is the Embassy of Albania planning to undertake to enhance cooperation and understanding between our peoples?

— Public diplomacy has always been a cornerstone of Albanian-Ukrainian relations, fostering deep cultural, educational, and humanitarian ties between our nations. Cultural diplomacy is one of the tools of public diplomacy. Undoubtedly, it influences the



Вшанування пам'яті захисників і захисниць України, полеглих у російсько-українській війні
Honouring the memory of the defenders of Ukraine who laid down their lives in the Russian-Ukrainian war

formation of the country's image and brand. Before the war, the Albanian language was taught in three Ukrainian schools in the Zaporizhzhia and Odesa regions, areas where the Albanian diaspora has lived for over 300 years. The role of the Albanian diaspora in Ukraine is also assessed as a connecting bridge between the two countries. The Albanian side continues its efforts to enable the building of concrete cooperation with the diaspora for the development of national identity, the preservation and development of their spiritual and material tradition, and the teaching of the Albanian language. We are deeply grateful to the Ukrainian authorities for supporting this initiative, which helped preserve our shared cultural heritage. Additionally, the Albanian Cultural Centre was established at the Izmail State University, and annual exhibitions, cultural exchanges, and student programmes strengthened our mutual understanding.

The war changed everything, disrupting many of these initiatives. However, we remain committed to continuing and expanding our efforts. Today, our focus is not only on preserving cultural ties but also on humanitarian initiatives. We are working on programmes to support the rehabilitation of Ukrainian military families and children affected by the war in Albania, offering them a chance to recover and regain a sense of normalcy.

Since 2015, the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Albania in Ukraine, Shahin Omarov, has been actively working to strengthen Albanian-Ukrainian relations. Even in the most difficult times, he has supported humanitarian initiatives and facilitated cultural and economic cooperation. His long-term efforts continue to play an important role in deepening the ties between our two nations, especially through public diplomacy. Noteworthy steps towards bolstering cultural ties include the 2018 agreement between the Diplomatic Academies of Albania and Ukraine, paving the way for the establishment of an Albanian Language Department at the Karazin Kharkiv National University.

Looking ahead, we aim to revive and expand our cultural exchanges, strengthen educational partnerships, and ensure that the rich historical ties between Albania and Ukraine continue to flourish. Despite the challenges, we believe that cultural diplomacy remains a powerful tool in bringing our peoples even closer together.

— *Your Excellency, to summarise, what is your overall view of the current state of Ukrainian-Albanian relations, its strongest aspects, and the areas that require short- and long-term attention?*

— The relationship between Albania and Ukraine has never been stronger. Our political and diplomatic cooperation has deepened significantly, with Albania standing firmly alongside Ukraine in its fight for sovereignty and European integration.

The strongest aspects of our relations include political alignment on key security issues, military cooperation, and unwavering solidarity on international platforms. However, there is still room for growth in economic ties, trade, and investment. Strengthening business relations, expanding tourism exchanges, and facilitating infrastructure projects will be crucial in the coming years.

In the long term, Albania remains committed to supporting Ukraine's European path and contributing to its post-war reconstruction. Together, we will continue to build a partnership based on shared values, mutual respect, and a vision for a free and prosperous Europe.

Interview dated 9 April 2025