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BELGIUM WILL REMAIN UKRAINE'S COMMITTED PARTNER

— Your Excellency, this is your second term as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Belgium to Ukraine. You first assumed this position at the onset of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, and now you have returned amid the full-scale war. What emotions did you experience upon returning to Ukraine and taking up this position at such a challenging time for the country? What key priorities do you set for yourself in this new term?

— The circumstances of my return to Ukraine were indeed dramatically and tragically different. Still, the underlying dynamics in the country and the relationship with our country have not changed. Ukraine remains steadfast in pursuing its freely chosen path towards full European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and Russia's full-scale invasion is a desperate but futile attempt to divert us from this course.

It is impressive to see how Ukraine manages to simultaneously resist brutal aggression while building its future within Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community. Now, my priorities in all this are, of course, to analyse and explain to my authorities the developments, progress made in that regard, and challenges, to implement our policies towards Ukraine, and to identify needs and opportunities for further concrete action. And for this, I can make good use of the comprehensive bilateral security agreement that our two countries signed in May 2024.

— You mentioned Belgium's support of Ukraine, which we highly appreciate, and the security agreement. Mr Ambassador, what has already been achieved under this agreement, and what prospects for cooperation does it open?

— This agreement consolidates the substantial support that Belgium has already been giving since the first days of the full-scale invasion. Belgium has been — and will remain — a committed and responsive contributor of military support to Ukraine. It began with delivering tons of badly needed fuel to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, soon followed by successive military support packages, including equipment, weapons, ammunition, and military ambulances. Belgium is also contributing to Ukraine's F-16 capability, with aircraft already made available for training purposes, including training pilots and ground crews. We are also responsible for maintaining the F-16s, which is crucial — having the planes is one thing, but keeping them operational requires extensive upkeep and a steady supply of spare parts. Belgium is looking after that now, and combat-ready planes will follow later.

Belgium also takes part in the maritime coalition and in the coalitions on demining, IT, ammunition and air defence. Recently Belgium also joined the drone coalition.

In addition, we have allocated critical financial resources to alleviate humanitarian needs, including humanitarian demining and medical evacuation. All humanitarian action is provided either directly between Belgium and Ukraine or through our financial contributions to the very valuable action deployed in Ukraine by several UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Moreover, since summer 2024, we have been actively participating in Ukraine's reconstruction efforts.

— After the end of the war, Ukraine will face immense challenges in rebuilding its economy and infrastructure. We are grateful for Belgium's support in this endeavour. What areas is your country focusing its efforts on? Are any specific initiatives or projects already being implemented or planned?

— Our contribution to Ukraine's reconstruction primarily takes the form of the four-year BE-Relieve programme, implemented by Enabel, the Belgian government agency for international cooperation. This programme focuses on three key areas: energy and circular reconstruction, health and social protection, and education and skills development.

The first investments are already taking shape, starting with the delivery of backup generators and mobile boilers to Kyiv and Chernihiv regions helping hospitals and schools withstand blackouts. While this support was particularly critical in the fall of 2024 to prepare



Зустріч Президента України Володимира Зеленського та Прем'єр-міністра Бельгії Барта де Вевера

Meeting between President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister of Belgium Bart De Wever

for the winter season, the programme also aims to strengthen decentralised energy generation capacity in the long term. Construction of bomb shelters is currently underway in the Kyiv region near educational institutions to ensure a safe learning environment for children, including constructing bomb shelters in the Kyiv region, which is currently underway. These shelters are designed to serve as both bomb shelters and spaces for after-school activities once the immediate threat has passed.

Intensive efforts are being made to engage with Ukrainian stakeholders at national, regional, and local levels to ensure the programme's effective implementation in full coordination with the Ukrainian authorities. The objective is to maximise impact in the shortest time possible.

Beyond reconstruction, the BE-Relieve programme is also designed to help Ukraine build a strong foundation for its EU accession. Study visits of Ukrainian experts in the areas of vocational training, education and employment services from the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions already took place.

— The energy transition and the use of renewable energy sources are among the priority issues on the European Union's agenda, and they have become much more acute since the beginning of the full-scale russian invasion. How do you assess Belgium's progress in this area? Are there opportunities for cooperation between our countries?

— Russia's full-scale invasion and the strategic importance of freeing ourselves from dependence on Russian oil and gas give us the perfect motivation to accelerate the energy transition, away from fossil fuels. Before coming to Ukraine, I served as special envoy for climate and have always maintained that our geopolitical and climate objectives have never been more aligned than they are now, at this critical juncture.

Unfortunately, our reliance on fossil fuels remains high, and we cannot change that overnight — especially in the industrial sector. However, the shift towards greener energy has begun, and significant progress has been made over the past years. At present, renewable energy sources account for about 30% of Belgium's electricity production. Belgium is a global wind energy leader, so visible, tangible progress exists. We are also seeing growing sales of electric vehicles: cars and bicycles.

Another clear trend in Belgium is that households increasingly install solar panels on their roofs and invest in home battery storage systems to meet their energy needs. This is precisely what we also see happen in Ukraine, and Belgium strongly supports this development. For example, in Ukraine, we are providing a €2.5 million grant for installing solar photovoltaics on hospitals, helping make critical services like healthcare and education more energy-independent.

At the same time, Belgium can also learn from Ukraine — particularly when it comes to protecting critical energy infrastructure and the effective techniques and solutions needed to do so.

— During your first term in office, Ukraine was already actively embarking on its path to EU membership. A decade later, accession negotiations were officially opened under Belgium's Presidency of the EU Council in June 2024. From your perspective, what can be done to ensure that this process moves as swiftly and effectively as possible?

— It is undeniable that Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine has accelerated the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine. This was a powerful political message from the EU to its partner, Ukraine. Thank you for acknowledging the important role Belgium played under its

presidency of the EU Council in the formal opening of accession talks in June 2024.

What is now needed to drive this process forward, I would say, is not so much unwarranted shortcuts, but tight discipline, sustained focus, and high-standard work on both sides. This is absolutely essential for a swift and successful conclusion to the accession talks. Ukraine and the EU are indeed committed to this path and are working hard to make the process as swift as possible.

History has shown that political momentum can accelerate the pace of these accession processes, as we saw in 2004 with the so-called Big Bang enlargement. However, we should not forget that deepening and enlarging the EU go hand in hand because growing EU membership requires strengthening the EU's institutional framework. This means ensuring effective decision-making, maintaining internal cohesion, ensuring the external effectiveness of the Union, and, of course, ensuring budgetary sustainability. It is in the interest of both existing and new members of the EU to make this process work and succeed.

— According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe exceeded 6 million as of autumn 2024, and Belgium has granted temporary protection status to more than 120,000 Ukrainians. How does your government view the future of these people, and what considerations are being discussed regarding their possible return or continued stay?

— I've been looking up the figures just to have the latest consolidated data, and according to the Belgian immigration office, around 92,000 Ukrainians have received temporary protection in Belgium between the start of the war and the end of 2024. Logically and naturally, the highest influx occurred in the first year after the full-scale invasion, with about 63,000 Ukrainians granted temporary protection. Then, in the following years, around 15,000 received protection in 2023 and 13,000 in 2024.

Throughout this period, various Belgian government services, from national to local level, have been closely working together to ensure that Ukrainians receive a decent welcome and to help them integrate well into their new temporary homes. Additionally, in line with the decision of the EU Council, we have extended this special protection status until March 2026. Lately the Council voiced its unanimous support to further extend this status till March 2027.

— *The full-scale russian aggression has posed an unprecedented challenge to the entire system of collective security in Europe. It has been reported that in 2025, the number of Belgian soldiers on standby for NATO will increase several times. How do you think the diplomatic and security landscape of the continent will change after the end of the war in Ukraine? What role does Belgium envision for itself in shaping the new security system?*

— It is clear that there is a growing awareness in Europe that we must become more sovereign, take greater responsibility for our own defence, and better equip ourselves to act and react appropriately to both immediate and future threats. Europe needs to strengthen its own defence capabilities and deterrence, and Belgium will fully participate in this endeavour. For that, of course, we must do our homework — meaning we need to drastically increase our defence expenditure and in fact meet the 2% of GDP target that NATO members have pledged to, while an even more ambitious target of 5% of GDP was decided at the NATO Summit in The Hague in June.

Increasing defence spending in a context of necessary budgetary austerity has been a key focus of the incoming Belgian government since February. Belgium as a loyal NATO ally has joined the consensus. Now, regarding any GDP indicator, it is indeed a crucial benchmark. However, I would also point out that even though Belgium has not yet reached this objective, what matters equally is our concrete presence and commitment on the ground. Belgium and its Armed Forces have always been, are, and will continue to be where they are needed. Whether under a NATO or an EU flag, Belgian forces are actively engaged in European operations — on land, in the air, and at sea.

For instance, Belgian troops take part in NATO's forward presence in Lithuania and Romania. Our F-16s contribute to Baltic air policing, protecting the skies over the Baltic countries. Our naval vessels participate in NATO-led mine detection and clearance operations, including in the Baltic Sea.

Belgium remains an active, committed, and reliable ally. We also play a role in supporting and training missions for Ukraine, both at home and in Ukraine itself. This includes training fighter pilots and ground crews, as well as contributing to humanitarian demining and handling explosive devices.

Belgium also joined the 'Coalition of the Willing' and is ready to take part in post-war stabilisation efforts.

— Cultural diplomacy plays an important role in fostering mutual understanding between nations. Cultural initiatives such as the Ukrainian Cultural Weeks in Bruges have become a tradition in Belgium. How do such initiatives contribute to strengthening bilateral ties? Are there plans to expand cultural cooperation between our countries?

— Thank you for noticing this cultural initiative in Bruges. I believe it is called the Cultural Week in Bruges. It is a long-standing tradition, a homegrown initiative that builds on the efforts of Ukrainians living in Bruges for some time. It has the full support of the local authorities and community and serves as a very meaningful and tangible way to connect people. I can also give a recent example from my hometown in Belgium, Mechelen, where an impressive exhibition was organised in November 2024. It featured around 20 young Ukrainian artists, each showcasing their work in various historical sites across the city. This initiative attracted significant attention — not only from the local population in Mechelen but also nationwide — thanks partly to extensive media coverage.

These kinds of events are powerful tools for raising awareness about Ukraine, its cultural identity, and its contemporary art scene. In my view, they are also excellent instruments for strengthening relations between our societies. Additionally, the presence of tens of thousands of Ukrainians in Belgium has broadened perspectives, sparking a great deal of interest in all things Ukrainian. Belgians have become much more familiar with key aspects of Ukrainian culture and identity.

I am very pleased to see how receptive the Belgian public has become to Ukrainian music, films, and other artistic expressions such as painting, sculpture, and ceramics. There is a growing interest and a deepening familiarity with Ukrainian culture. Ukrainian authors are now being translated into our national languages, further enriching this cultural exchange.

Beyond the arts, sport has also played a crucial role in bringing people together. Ukrainian football stars and tennis players have become household names in Belgium, and we have all been impressed by the number of medals Ukrainian athletes have won at the Olympics and Paralympics.

All of this has fostered a great deal of goodwill toward Ukraine and an increasing curiosity about the country. Ukraine should certainly continue to build upon this to amplify its voice abroad. In this effort, Belgium stands firmly with Ukraine, and we will do everything possible to ensure Ukraine's voice is heard worldwide.

— Mr Ambassador, on 30 January 2025, you handed over the key to the European Youth Capital 2025 to representatives of Lviv's youth community and the mayor. This is the first time a Ukrainian city has received this status, following in the footsteps of the Belgian city of Ghent. In times of global challenges caused by war and economic shifts, young people play a crucial role in the recovery of countries and societies. How can Ukraine and Belgium work together on initiatives that help unlock the younger generation's potential and facilitate their engagement in international processes?

— Thank you for asking the question and for allowing me to highlight the importance of empowering youth, especially in societies under pressure. The example you mentioned regarding the European Youth Capital initiative perfectly illustrates how we can empower young people, recognise their essential contribution to society, and acknowledge their role in the country's future development. It also highlights how youth can foster international links with young people in other countries.



Ghent held the title of the European Youth Capital in 2024. Lviv, in turn, has been awarded the title for 2025. As part of the symbolic handover, the mayor of Ghent entrusted me with this solid wooden key that comes with the title, and I personally drove it to Lviv to hand it over to the mayor and the representatives of Lviv's youth.

I found it particularly interesting that Lviv does not want to keep the title just for itself. Instead, it aims to share the exposure and benefits of the title with other cities across Ukraine. This is a brilliant way to ensure that more cities can benefit from the increased attention that Ukraine is receiving from the outside world, highlighting Ukraine's dynamic, youthful spirit, which undoubtedly holds a bright future for Europe.

It is important to note that the cities that have won this highly competitive contest in the past, remain in close contact. This network of towns collaborates closely, exchanging experiences and best practices. Ghent will certainly continue to work closely with Lviv in this regard, contributing to the success of Lviv's mission as European Youth Capital.

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