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SLOVENIA AND UKRAINE: local development assistance and intercultural solidarity

— Slovenia is a steadfast and close European partner of Ukraine, and we are delighted to have our relations at such an excellent level. In July 2024, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister of Slovenia Robert Golob signed a bilateral security cooperation agreement, enhancing Slovenia's ongoing support in military and humanitarian areas. Your Excellency, what is the agreement's impact on the relations between Slovenia and Ukraine?

— I would like to highlight that I see this security agreement as one of the normal steps that define our good relationship. We were among the first to condemn the full-scale Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, Slovenia has tried to help as much as it can in the fields of military assistance and security, as well as humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and political support.

There are already a few visible results of implementing the agreement you mentioned. Those may be small steps, but our countries have exchanged working groups based on this agreement. Currently, the focus is mainly on the security and military spheres, but I do hope other areas will also follow. I think it provides a very good foundation that reflects our excellent relations and pushes us to pursue all possible ways to extend cooperation.

— Slovenia's approach to Ukraine's recovery emphasises support for local communities, including through initiatives led by the Centre for European Perspective — a Slovenian governmental organisation. In addition to infrastructure recovery, Slovenia supports social and humanitarian initiatives, such as an environmental youth project, psychological rehabilitation for Ukrainian women, etc. You have visited several

Ukrainian regions to understand the needs on the ground. Which reconstruction and rehabilitation projects or areas would you highlight as Slovenia's priority areas?

— As an Ambassador, I cannot remain only in Kyiv. I think it is very important to get a sense of what is going on across the country and stay in touch with it. I do not travel to the areas our security team's threat assessments mark as the most dangerous, but there are definitely areas we travel to that are more high-risk than Kyiv.

However, we live in Ukraine alongside the Ukrainian people. Many locals remain very close to the frontline — they are the most vulnerable and in greatest need. I believe it is important to pay attention to them. With this in mind, I have visited many regions, albeit not all of them yet, due to the many other responsibilities and events, including numerous visits.

I have visited the Kharkiv and Khmelnytskyi regions as part of our development and humanitarian aid. I have also been to the Odesa region — specifically to Izmail — three times because another project we are implementing covers the Odesa and Kherson regions. I have also visited Zhytomyr and Lviv a few times. Although unrelated to our aid, I also visited Zakarpattia to attend several meetings. Recently, I visited the Dnipro region.

Slovenia currently focuses more on humanitarian and development help, especially helping children, providing psychosocial support, rehabilitating war veterans, and demining. Several of our projects were launched before the war. The invasion put those on a brief pause, but some of them have since been completed, and we are now looking at the possibility of upscaling or continuing them. One of these projects is in Zhytomyr, and another is in Lviv.

In the beginning, our Prime Minister prioritised the Kharkiv region for our humanitarian and development projects. However, given the difficult situation in Kharkiv, our focus has narrowed to providing humanitarian assistance. For the child protection and social policy project, we selected the Khmelnytskyi region. The project we launched there involves the construction of a house for large foster families. We hope this is just the first of several we will develop over the next two years. The project in Izmail was decided prior to this renewed focus on Kharkiv and Khmelnytskyi. Still, due to its success and significant support from local NGOs, we decided to continue with it.



Зустріч з представниками Дніпропетровської ОВА. 2 квітня 2025 року
Meeting with representatives of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Military Administration, 2 April 2025



Візит на екологічний дослідницький пункт у Національному природному парку «Слобожанський» у Харківській області, яку створила ГО «Green Art Tour» за підтримки Міністерства закордонних та європейських справ Словенії
Visit to the ecological research station in the Slobozhanskyi National Nature Park in the Kharkiv region, which was established by the Green Art Tour NGO with the support of the MFEA of Slovenia



Візит до ресурсно-відновлювального центру «Надія» для дітей і молоді з інвалідністю на Житомирщині, реконструкцію якого співфінансувало Міністерство закордонних та європейських справ Словенії та реалізували завдяки допомозі організації «Slovenska karitas» і місії «Карітас-Спес Україна». 15 травня 2025 року

Visit to the Nadiia Recreation Centre for children and youth with disabilities, located in the Zhytomyr region, the reconstruction of which was co-financed by Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and implemented with the help of Slovenska karitas and Caritas-Spes Ukraine, 15 May 2025



Візит до міста Ізмаїл у межах проекту «Турбота про психічне здоров'я та психосоціальна допомога дітям та їхнім сім'ям» і зустріч з мером Андрієм Абрамченком, представниками місцевої влади та волонтерами. 11 вересня 2024 року

Visit to the city of Izmail as part of the project titled Mental Health Care and Psychosocial Support to Children and Their Families and meeting with the mayor, Mr Andrii Abramchenko, as well as representatives of local authorities and volunteers, 11 September 2024

Therefore, we are focusing more on initiatives outside of Kyiv. Slovenia, being a smaller country compared to Ukraine, believes it can make a big difference in certain local communities, even with smaller projects, particularly in areas where help is otherwise scarce or entirely absent.

I would also like to inform you that, around two or three years ago, our Directorate for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid decided to allocate some money directly to embassies, enabling us to implement small projects. These are small grants, but they go directly to local communities. In 2024, two of our proposed projects were approved. I am very pleased that four of our five propositions received approval this year, and we are now upgrading our projects.

I have also already visited Krasnokutsk, Kharkiv region, where we are now in the third year of our projects, and in 2025, I plan to visit the communities where new Embassy-led projects will be implemented.

It is very important that our project, which is implemented through the Centre for European Perspective, is part of the U-LEAD initiative. U-LEAD is a project initially launched by Germany, but by now, more countries have joined, and we were among the first to do so. It focuses on providing support and implementing various types of projects within local communities. This is particularly important for Ukraine, as the project began before the war. In Slovenia's case, we try to connect communities — Slovenian communities share their experience of how to, for instance, access European funds during the enlargement process, and how to prepare projects in a way that makes them eligible for funding. Many procedures are involved — not just bureaucracy, but also the know-how necessary to navigate these systems.

In our case, there is such a great friendship between some of the towns. I can mention Drohobych and our town Hrastnik, or Bucha and Kočevje, and others, such as Novovolynsk with Kranj. When the war started, these local communities were the first to send humanitarian aid to Ukraine — trucks with supplies. They became an example for everyone else not to be afraid. This has even been referenced later in the development of this project, and our cooperation between local communities is now cited as an example of good practice across the EU for how to provide effective support.



Зустріч із представниками Перещепинської громади на Дніпропетровщині, яка співпрацює зі словенським муніципалітетом Ідрія

Meeting with representatives of Pereshchepyne community in the Dnipro region, which cooperates with Slovenian municipality of Idrija

I can tell you that I really admire Ukrainians. In every town I have visited — and perhaps this is even more visible outside the capital city, which naturally has a different rhythm of life — people live side by side with the Ukrainian Armed Forces. I witnessed volunteers in many towns preparing camouflage nets, preparing packages, children sending their drawings as tokens of support, and people collecting food and all sorts of things. Everybody is living with the people who are fighting for Ukraine and for a just peace. For me, it is really such an experience that cannot be fully understood if you do not go and connect with the people. They are always so grateful and offer such warm hospitality. I have visited many small towns where people told me, ‘No one has ever come to us, but now you have’. This gives me real joy — the opportunity to speak with them, to see how much they support the fight against this unjust aggression, and how strong this resilience among people is. I am really grateful for this opportunity.

— *How would you characterise the current state of economic and trade relations between Slovenia and Ukraine? What have been the main impacts of the war on bilateral trade, and what steps are both countries taking to maintain stable economic cooperation after these three years?*

— Our economic and trade cooperation had always been good before the war. Of course, as with every head of mission, or any diplomat in general, there is always the wish to do more. You are constantly looking for new opportunities.

Trade cooperation was slightly affected during the first year after the full-scale aggression, with a moderate decrease in trade. However, the companies in both countries picked up on that very fast. Some Slovenian companies have kept their representative offices open here throughout, and by 2023, trade volumes had already returned to pre-war levels. That is very good news.

We have especially good cooperation in the pharmaceutical sector. In addition, there is notable cooperation in raw materials, IT services, and agricultural goods — Ukrainian exports — while Slovenia sells or is represented here with electrical machinery and some chemical products.

There may be fewer visits to Ukraine now because of the security situation. Everyone weighs whether things can be done online or if travel is truly necessary. But we already have some new initiatives. I hope that after peace is reached in Ukraine, we can boost our economic cooperation, especially by being involved in the recovery of Ukraine.

— Slovenia was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2024–25 term. How does Slovenia leverage its Security Council seat to contribute to international security? And what are your country's key priorities during this time?

— I can say that we have taken this opportunity very seriously. The preparations, both during the election campaign and afterwards, were quite intense, and we paid much attention to that. Our Foreign Minister, for example, is very busy, having travelled to different parts of the world in connection with our seat in the Security Council. We are trying to be an active, open, and transparent member of the Security Council.

As part of our priorities, we give special attention to Ukraine and the Western Balkans, as well as to the Middle East, given the outbreak of war in Gaza. However, everybody knows that the situation with Ukraine in the Security Council is very difficult because the Russian Federation is a permanent member.

If we talk about Slovenia's thematic priorities, these are already incorporated in our foreign policy priorities and are also similar in the Security Council. Chief among them is the protection of civilians in armed conflict, an area we paid close attention to even before becoming a member. Another priority is women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in matters of peace and security. And, of course, all the green themes like climate and water.

— In spring 2024, Slovenian government websites suffered cyber-attacks by a pro-russian hacker group after Slovenia joined a Czech-led initiative to supply artillery ammunition to Ukraine. How can Slovenia and Ukraine cooperate on cybersecurity, combat disinformation, and strengthen defence against hybrid warfare in the digital domain?

— Before I came to Ukraine, I worked in the EU and Brussels at a time when cybersecurity was already a priority, at least during discussions. Still, I think that we didn't give this subject enough attention. We can all see how vulnerable we are and must strengthen this security.

I cannot go into all the details about the cooperation because this topic is very sensitive. Still, I can tell you that we have already established cooperation with Ukraine, including on security issues and cyber defence. We think Ukraine can share some excellent practices with us because it has been dealing with cyberattacks on a much larger scale. At the same time, Slovenia has its own different approach, and maybe we can share and compare our ways to learn from and teach each other. I can confirm that such cooperation is already underway.

— Since the early days of the full-scale invasion, universities across Europe — including Slovenia — extended strong gestures of solidarity with Ukraine through symbolic and practical cooperation. Your Excellency, how do you see the role of academic and scientific collaboration in deepening bilateral ties, and are there examples of Slovenian-Ukrainian partnerships that you find particularly meaningful?

— Universities often find ways to cooperate with one another and sometimes even surprise embassies because we are not always aware of all the ongoing interactions. However, we do know that they are very active in this way. I think that university and student cooperation is very important. Sometimes, they start doing extra work based on our humanitarian and development programmes, and this has remained true even during the full-scale invasion. For example, our project in Izmail also involved a visit to our university, leading to the University of Izmail establishing cooperation with the University of Ljubljana. Before that, there was already an existing partnership with the University of Maribor.

One reason developing collaboration projects like this is necessary is that currently, there are fewer opportunities to bring Slovenian students to Ukraine. I also find it important that Ukraine maintains two possibilities for studying the Slovenian language — one in Kyiv and the other in Lviv — because it's vital that we also study our languages if we want to know each other and help each other prosper. I am delighted with the

work of the Ukrainian Embassy in Ljubljana; the University of Ljubljana has decided that, with the next academic year, which starts in September 2025, they are going to open the Ukrainian lectorate, so Slovenia will become one of the countries where university students can study the Ukrainian language.

Ukrainians, to whom our country offered temporary protection in the first few days of the war, are now stimulating more intercultural exchanges and encouraging our people to get to know each other's cultures and languages as well.

In addition, inter-university cooperation is also important because it usually inspires the translation of Slovenian authors to Ukrainian and vice versa, so that we can read our countries' most important and famous literature in our languages. It's another example of something that nurtures the connection between the people of Slovenia and Ukraine.

In May 2024, I gave a small lecture at Izmail University about the EU meeting students, and it was my great pleasure. In April 2025, the GDIP organised and invited me to a similar event as well. I think it's always good to meet young people, talk to them, and learn their views and experiences. I always inform the universities of my plans to visit their towns and that I can talk to their students if they wish to organise a meeting. It's especially important for the students studying European affairs or international relations; theoretically, they may know more than I, but I can tell them a lot from the experience I gained over my long years of practice.

— *Public diplomacy plays a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding between nations. Could you share your perspective on how Slovenia and Ukraine can enhance cultural exchanges in the coming years?*

— One thing is for sure: even now, during the full-scale aggression, there are Slovenians who come to Ukraine and travel around the country, who end up writing books about this experience, as well as translating literature. There are different kinds of Ukrainian exhibitions in Slovenia, and I follow many of these activities because they are important. One of the things that I think we should do is promote the exhibitions of murals because Ukraine has great wall painting art. I know of at least two such exhibitions in Slovenia: one in Hrastnik and another in my town, Maribor. I also hope we will send some films to one of the film festivals, and I would like us to consider organising an exhibition where artists could give online presentations.

Honestly, however, we are so busy with so many political and other duties that cultural efforts sometimes suffer a little. Nevertheless, we also

discuss these matters with the communities that I visit. Hopefully, we now have all the channels necessary to encourage more public diplomacy, because it's always a great joy for any ambassador to present their country in such ways and see people's response. And they do respond. I think that the people in Ukraine, especially at the moment, pay such great attention to the culture. I can see that theatres are full, the exhibitions are full, etc. I see even more enthusiasm for such things than in my country; Ukrainians really show the world how important culture is to them.

At the same time, you have a very active Minister of Culture who also organised a meeting of the EU cultural ministers in Uzhhorod, on 1 February 2025, with the plea to help preserve the Ukrainian cultural heritage. Language and culture exchange are really important, so there is much opportunity for us to make at least small plans, even now, when we still don't know when we will have lasting peace in this country.

— Your decision to learn Ukrainian is a powerful gesture of respect. What message would you like to convey personally, as a diplomat and someone actively discovering Ukraine through its language?

— I always followed the principle that whenever I come to a new country, I try to learn at least the basics of the language. It's not always easy to start learning a new language the older you get, but when I came to Ukraine, I told myself that even though I had so many responsibilities and so little time, I still had to make an effort.

I didn't start learning immediately because the first few months since my appointment were incredibly intense, but then I started and found Ukrainian to be a beautiful language. And I don't mean to disrespect any language, but I've found some other languages more difficult than Ukrainian. Sometimes, I can relate to some of the words that existed in the old Slovenian, which are still used in Ukrainian. It may be a bit easier for Slavic people to study it, as even though I don't know it well yet, I can understand quite a lot. I usually don't listen to translations anymore — I listen to people directly when they speak Ukrainian.

It's still difficult for me to speak it, yet I can see such appreciation from the Ukrainian people whenever I do. I think that your country was under the pressure of speaking a language other than Ukrainian for such a long time, that this is also important as a foreigner to show that, no, your language is the one that is connected with your identity, and is vital for your future.

I enjoy taking lessons. Thanks to the GDIP, I got an excellent teacher. What I appreciate the most is that we not only do grammar exercises

and some lessons, but also engage with the culture. If I tell my teacher I'm interested, for example, in Taras Shevchenko, we can read some of his poems. When I told her that I liked 'Chervona ruta', we read about the song and the meaning of the lyrics — the same with 'Oi u luzi chervona kalyna' and the national anthem. So, through taking Ukrainian lessons, I learn more about Ukrainian history little by little, and discover some famous Ukrainian songs.

Satisfaction from this goes both ways. I'm glad to be able to speak Ukrainian to people, and they are also happy that I do that. So, I think that everybody who comes here should try it. I don't think I will ever be an expert at Ukrainian, but there is no need. It's just important to understand and communicate with people. When I return to places I visited at the beginning of my mandate, everybody tells me, 'Oh, now you are much better,' so this is also encouragement for me, making it easier to communicate with the people.

I was taking Russian lessons when I was first in Ukraine, in 2009–10. I didn't become good at that language, but sometimes I have to think about distinguishing between some Russian and Ukrainian words. Also, many people often mix the two languages, so sometimes, I'm not sure which language they speak, and it can get confusing. But what I have to say is that the propaganda about how no one is allowed to speak the Russian language here and how everybody is angry if you use the Russian words is untrue. It's just that the people are happy if you speak Ukrainian, even if you mix it up with another language. I know Polish, so sometimes I also mix between Polish and Ukrainian, but nobody cares. If they understand me, we will both be happy.

I would like to share my appreciation of two very simple Ukrainian words: *koly* and *nikoly*. In the Slovenian language, we don't say *koli*, as we have a completely different word used to ask 'when?', and when I first learned *koly*, I couldn't remember it. But then I learned that when you want to say 'never' in Ukrainian, you negate the *koly*, and it turns into *nikoly*. In Slovenia, we say exactly the same thing: *nikoli*. I never knew where we got this word from because our word for 'when' is *kdaj*, even though we don't say *nikdaj* to say 'never'. So, Slovenian *nikoli* came from the same old Slavic root as Ukrainian *koly*, and Slovenian people don't normally know the reason that word exists, even though it's obvious in the Ukrainian language.

Interview dated 12 May 2025