

Andrii KUZMENKO,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of Ukraine to the State of Qatar*

OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES AND LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

— *Your Excellency, your term of office coincided with major global developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Please outline the biggest challenges the Embassy has had to overcome in that timeframe.*

— The COVID-19 pandemic impelled us to quickly adapt to new work conditions. Today, we cannot imagine the operations of embassies without the use of the tools of digitalisation. Diplomacy de facto transitioning into digital mode during the pandemic gave embassies a workable way to operate. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine created a serious challenge to our diplomatic mission. Wartime diplomacy amidst the full-scale Russian aggression had us reframe familiar rules and approaches. Ukraine's wartime diplomacy started with the actions of the President during the first hours of the full-scale invasion. To some, his phone exchanges and statements initially seemed too abrasive and even controversial. Indeed, those moves went against certain stereotypes, but, in the end, they worked.

Working with Qatari partners, we have also abided by the principles of wartime diplomacy voiced by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba. Those principles required fast decision-making, flexibility, and clarity in communication to ensure the receiving state's support for Ukraine.

The war did not just require us to work harder but also take active involvement in international forums and meetings to keep the world community informed about the factual events and consequences of the aggression. The wartime challenges demand a more robust approach to diplomacy and new methods of getting results. For over two years, Ukrainian diplomats have worked in a special mode of wartime diplomacy. Despite all the challenges, Ukraine and its partners have forged a global coalition to counter Russian aggression. The well-coordinated work of the Ukrainian MFA enabled us to make significant gains under extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

— *What are the peculiarities specific to working with the Middle Eastern states? What challenges in bilateral relations currently demand urgent solutions?*



Державна міністерка Катару з питань міжнародної співпраці Лолва Аль-Хатер і Посол України в Катарі Андрій Кузьменко

Qatar's Minister of State for International Cooperation Lolwah Al-Khater and Ambassador of Ukraine to Qatar Andrii Kuzmenko

— Our main focus in the work with the countries of the Middle East is the political aspect. The region is unbelievably dynamic and often unstable, which is something that sets the diplomats a task of constantly monitoring events and rapidly reacting to change. The specificity of working with the states of the Middle East — including Qatar — encompasses the need to be mindful of cultural and religious peculiarities and comply with diplomatic protocol, which, as is the case in Qatar, comes with a certain set of Islamic and national attributes. When it comes to the countries of the Middle East, and especially the Gulf States, it is important to develop trusting relations via direct contacts as opposed to phone or e-mail exchanges. We have to arrange face-to-face meetings and speak in an honest and open manner.

One of the foremost issues we currently need to bring to resolution is the implementation of the humanitarian projects under the \$100 million in aid which Qatar announced in 2023. The aid will be channelled to support Ukraine's war-torn regions. We actively cooperate with our Qatari partners to ensure the efficient use of these funds in restoring our civilian infrastructure, setting up bomb shelters in educational institutions, humanitarian demining, etc.

Together, we are not only overcoming existing challenges but laying a solid foundation for future cooperation.

— *Qatar assists the efforts to return home the Ukrainian children illegally deported by Russia. What underlies Qatar's decision to help Ukraine in this regard?*

— Qatar is Ukraine's number one partner on the Peace Formula's humanitarian prong concerning the return of deported individuals, including children. The decision in question is based mainly on the principles of humanitarian solidarity and international law. Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani — the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar — has stated that after receiving the respective request from Ukraine, Qatar decided to utilise its diplomatic channels and ties with Russia to guarantee the security of children deported by the aggressor. In Qatar, the question of children's protection is extremely important, for it is a distinctive reflection of culture in a country where taking care of children is a state priority.

Qatar leads by an example of active humanitarian diplomacy, which confirms the country's role as a mediator in the international arena.

— *As we know, Qatar actively supports the Grain From Ukraine initiative, which aims to implement the second point of the Ukrainian Peace Formula — food security. What are the other points to which Qatar could contribute, and what steps has the Embassy undertaken to promote the Peace Formula?*

— The State of Qatar attributes great weight to the issues of global food security. Qatar's support for the Ukrainian President's initiative Grain From Ukraine through the allocation of \$20 million is an expression of the country's foreign policy agenda of implementing humanitarian aid as a soft power tool. By Qatar's decision, the grain is being prepared to be shipped to Somalia, which demonstrates our receiving state's commitment to guaranteeing the food security of famine-suffering countries. Furthermore, Qatar is one of the world's key guarantors of energy security — including European energy security, especially since the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine — and is dislodging Russia from the global liquified natural gas market.

In its day-to-day work, the Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar is actively promoting the Ukrainian Peace Formula, with an emphasis on the points on food and energy security and the return of incarcerated and deported individuals. The State of Qatar is already working on implementing the provisions of the fourth point — the humanitarian prong regarding the return of Ukrainian children whom Russia has illegally taken away. Another evidence of Qatar's dedication to the obligations it has undertaken towards the peaceful settlement in Ukraine was the participation of the receiving state's representatives in meetings of national security and foreign policy advisers on the Peace Formula and, by extension, in the inaugural Global Peace Summit.

— *The Ukrainian community in Qatar is quite numerous despite geographic remoteness. Please tell us how the Embassy interacts with it.*



День вишиванки в межах Українського навчального дитячого клубу при Посольстві

Vyshyvanka Day at the Ukrainian Children's Learning Club at the Embassy

— Due to legislative restrictions, associations of Ukrainian citizens do not formally exist in Qatar. Generally speaking, Qatar's Ukrainian community is well-integrated into the Qatari society, yet it is also rather dispersed.

Relying on its own capacity and occasional funds from sponsors, the Embassy carries out official events involving members of the community as well as themed events on Ukrainian national holidays and important dates from our history.

We are also independently maintaining the operation of the Ukrainian Children's Learning Club within the Embassy, and I'm extremely grateful to my wife, Maiia, who is in charge of this area of work.

We cooperate with local cultural institutions (Katara Cultural Village, Qatar Museums, etc.) to organise Ukrainian community's gatherings, themed exhibitions, and also cinema screenings of new Ukrainian film releases.

From the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian community in Qatar has been actively aiding the Ukrainian army with the support of the Embassy. Volunteers from among the Ukrainians in Qatar raise funds for the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and organise deliveries of military equipment to the front.

— *Your Excellency, how does Qatari society perceive the Russian war against Ukraine? Which methods of public diplomacy and narratives does the Embassy utilise to ensure that the problem of war remains on the agenda of media and improve understanding between the countries?*

— Although Qatar is geographically distant from Ukraine, local mass media and public opinion actively respond to the events occurring in our country. Overall, Qatar's society expresses sympathy for the Ukrainian people and supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Above all, it has to do with the fact that Qatar has a good understanding of what it's like having to protect its sovereignty and independence. A testament to this was seen in the public's reaction to the 'Qatar blockade', which began in June 2017 after Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE announced the severance of political, commercial, economic, financial, logistical, and humanitarian ties with Doha.

It took until 2021 to resolve the conflict diplomatically. Having secured its sovereignty and independence, Qatar emerged victorious from this crisis, in part because the 'Qatar blockade' had become a powerful force for consolidating the population and developing the economy.

Qataris understand the importance of adherence to international law and condemn aggression in all its manifestations.

Over the past few years, the Embassy's primary task in the field of public diplomacy has been to implement the initiative of the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, to create and operate Ukrainian-language audio guides. Our efforts in this area resulted in the official launch of our audio guide at the National Museum of Qatar in 2022. After the English-language one, ours is the second audio guide launched in this museum.

An important part of the Embassy's activities in the field of expert diplomacy is our engagement with Qatar's political scientists. We use available opportunities, including the platforms of research centres, to regularly address Ukrainian topics in the academic and media environment of the host country. The scientific credibility of Qatari political science platforms has greatly contributed to the dissemination of Ukrainian narratives in the host country's political science environment, which is characterised by certain limitations.

As a result of these efforts, the war against Ukraine is not fading from the information environment, while mutual understanding between Qatar and Ukraine is strengthening.

Our team closely monitors developments and reports on the ongoing situation in Ukraine, emphasising the importance of supporting our country in the international arena. For example, our social media pages provide up-to-date information that helps people develop an objective picture of the situation.

— *Qatar owns the Arab world's largest media holding: Al Jazeera. What sentiments prevail across this outlet's publications? How bad is the presence of russian propaganda, and what can be done to counter it?*

— Most of the Al Jazeera publications cover Russia's war against Ukraine from different angles, often considering both sides' perspectives. They say it is because of the outlet's 'principle of independence and impartiality'.

Russian propaganda can gain presence through content that shows the Russian frame of reference, but its share is fairly insignificant. The tone of the outlet's publications is mostly neutral.

To counter Russian propaganda, the Embassy of Ukraine in Qatar actively cooperates with the TV channel, providing verified information, organising interviews and briefings with Ukrainian officials, and inviting independent experts. In this context, it also helps that the team of Al Jazeera English has accreditation of Ukraine and works on the ground. Social media is an effective tool in the Embassy's arsenal as it gives us opportunities to spread truthful information about the situation in Ukraine and refute the aggressor state's fake news.

— *Your Excellency, please outline the current scope of our countries' economic and commercial ties.*

— According to the State Customs Service of Ukraine, in 2024, Ukrainian commodity exports to Qatar totalled \$11,430,000, while its imports from Qatar amounted to \$19,530,000, resulting in a negative balance of \$8,100,000. The main export items to Qatar were animal and vegetable fats and oils. Over 90% of imports from Qatar consisted of plastics, polymeric materials and products made of them.

Russian aggression against Ukraine seriously complicated bilateral economic and commercial cooperation. With the onset of the Russian Federation's aggression, the Qatari side, which used to actively import a broad range of Ukrainian-made products, essentially ceased cooperation with Ukrainian companies. Now, we are gradually working on bringing Ukrainian exports back to Qatar. However, exports of commodities still face risks due to the militarised state of the Black and Azov Seas and increased purchase prices caused by changes in logistic routes due to the dangers of shipping via the Black Sea.

— *In March 2023, Special Representative of Ukraine for the Middle East and Africa Maksym Subkh visited Qatar, where he conducted several meetings. During one of them, he presented the Industrial Investment Menu of Ukraine. Which projects caught the Qatari side's interest? What are the prospects for Qatar's involvement in post-war recovery?*

— During his stay in Doha, Maksym Subkh had substantive discussions with the CEO of Qatar Investment Authority, Mansoor al-Mahmoud. The Ukrainian diplomat mapped out concrete mechanisms for Qatari investors' potential involvement in Ukraine. During that meeting, the Ukrainian side presented the Industrial Investment Menu of Ukraine and also gave a presentation on Diia, the web portal for governmental services. These are the two promising areas of bilateral cooperation.

I should mention that the Qatari side is planning to substantively consider its options concerning investments in the Ukrainian industry following the cessation of hostilities. This has to do mainly with the Qatar Investment Authority's pragmatic approach to selecting projects.

The crowning achievement of Ukrainian-Qatari investment cooperation has been the agreement regarding the concession of the Ukrainian port Olvia, signed on 20 August 2020 between the Ministry of Infrastructure of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Sea Ports Authority, and QTerminals Qatar. Another important investment event was when the Nebras Power company purchased solar energy assets in several Ukrainian regions. Energy, agriculture, road infrastructure, and IT hold considerable potential for enhancing the cooperation between the two countries. Qatar is already involved in the development of several projects related to Ukraine's post-war recovery. We are now awaiting the implementation of specific arrangements across such areas as reconstruction of civilian infrastructure, humanitarian demining, and education.

— *To follow up on the previous question, what kind of valuable experience can Ukraine share with Doha?*

— First of all, the Ukrainian war experience can become an important asset for Qatar in terms of reinforcing its defence capability and strengthening security, especially in the face of comparable geopolitical challenges.

In this regard, Qatar may find benefit in Ukraine's experience in naval defence, particularly in terms of the application of unmanned surface vessels.

Ukraine and Qatar can broaden their interaction within several international organisations. Foremost among them is IAEA. Nuclear security and development of nuclear technology for peaceful use stand out as promising areas in this context.

As an internationally-accepted mediator, Qatar can and should play an important role at the UN, especially during the General Assembly votes. Such an example of active and responsible position would encourage other countries of the region and the broader Islamic world to get involved and vote in favour of Ukraine.

Despite Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, it is time for us to work with Qatar on preparing future investment plans. Ukraine can offer Qatar projects to establish logistics hubs in neighbouring countries of Eastern Europe. Such proposals may rest on Qatar's experience in developing port infrastructure in Antalya (Türkiye) and Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and constructing the Qatar Airways container terminals for prospective flight routes.

The supply of fuel to Ukraine is not the only promising method of cooperation in the energy industry. Qatar is one of the main players in the global gas market, and our countries can cooperate to store Qatari gas exported to the European market in Ukrainian underground storage facilities. There are also strong prospects for bilateral projects around solar energy.

Expanded services trade can offer us new areas of cooperation. Innovative technologies and IT are the areas where Qatari investment and Ukrainian technology could contribute to finding new niches in the Middle East. This applies to both civilian technology and dual-use or military technology, such as drone production.