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GERMAN-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS IN 2019

The year of 2019 was a very special year – both in German-Ukrainian relations – and for me personally:

For me personally, as this is already my 3rd posting to Ukraine – not a very likely scenario for a German career diplomat.

When I came to Ukraine for the first time in 1994–1997 on my very first posting I was in charge of culture and media. President Kuchma just started his first term. Kyiv in the 90ies was very different from Kyiv nowadays. Few cars and even some food rationing in the beginning.

During my second term 2010–2015, I was Deputy Head of Mission and lived through Maidan and the Russian aggression in the east. Those were probably the most intense years of my life.

Now, in my third term I have the great honor and privilege to serve as Ambassador in the country I cherish so deeply.

Only a few days after my arrival my team and I observed the snap elections for the Verkhovna Rada. We – like all other observers – witnessed transparent, free and fair elections just like the elections for the Office of the President of Ukraine in spring. These significantly raised the trust of many Ukrainians into their nation's political institutions. Even before I arrived in Ukraine I had the pleasure to attend President Zelensky's visit to Berlin in June last year (myself serving at the Office of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany at the time).

The years 2019 and 2020, however, are of particular historic importance for Germany and Ukraine:

On 5 September 2019, we commemorated 80 years since the beginning of World War II in which Nazi-ruled Germany brought such incredible devastation and suffering across all of Europe – including Ukraine.

As Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier outlined it in his speech at Warsaw on 1 September 2019: *‘The past is not over. On the contrary, the further back this war lies, the more important remembrance becomes. A war ends when arms fall silent. But its impact is a legacy that lasts generations. Reconciliation is a blessing that we Germans could not demand, but one we want to live up to. You should measure us by the responsibility we take on. Europe is our responsibility! The united Europe is what saves us. It is the lesson of centuries of war, devastation, enmity and hatred’.*

This year, on 8 May 2020, we celebrated 75 years since the end of the war, the liberation of Germany from Nazi rule and parts of the European continent from foreign occupation.

Speaking on 8 May this year in Luhansk region (where the expulsion from Ukrainian territory began in 1942) and Berlin (from where the war had been unleashed and where it finally ended) respectively, President Zelensky and President Steinmeier used similar words to describe the consequences: *'On this day, Ukraine, together with the whole civilized world, says: Never again. Today these are the two most important words for the history of mankind and its future'*, said President Zelensky in his speech on the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation.

In his speech on the Day of Liberation at the Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Victims of War and Tyranny, Federal President Steinmeier declared: *"Never again," we vowed after the war. But for us Germans in particular, this "never again" means "never again alone." And this sentence is nowhere so true as in Europe. We must keep Europe together. We must think, feel and act as Europeans. If we do not hold Europe together, also during and after this pandemic, then we will have shown ourselves not to be worthy of 8 May. If Europe fails, the "never again" also fails. The international community learned from this "never again". After 1945, it forged a new foundation out of all it had learnt from this catastrophe, it built human rights and international law, rules to preserve peace and cooperation. Our country, from which so much evil once emanated, has over the years changed from being a threat to the international order to being its champion. We must not allow this peaceful order to disintegrate before our eyes'.*

Acknowledging our ever-lasting responsibility this year's commemorative events offer an opportunity to reflect on the importance of dealing with our own national past in ways that will benefit today's youth and the next generations. 'Never again' – this is the most important message. To that end the German government engages in funding activities by civil society and educational institutions aimed at enabling reflection on history and exchange between participants, especially youth and students, from Germany and the countries of the Eastern Partnership, one of the most active of which is Ukraine. During the past years we have seen many projects involving schools, universities, research institutions as well as Jewish communities, artists, museums and others. The Embassy has held a commemoration ceremony in January at the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day to honor the memory of those murdered by the Nazi regime. Since its establishment in 2015 the German-Ukrainian Historians' Commission, supported by the German government and under the patronage of former foreign ministers Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Pavlo Klimkin, has strengthened exchange between experts and universities in both countries.

Shortly after the end of WWII the European continent was divided in a Cold War – and Germany was split into two parts for decades. On 9 November 2019, we celebrated 30 years since the collapse of the Berlin wall and this year, on October 3, we will celebrate 30 years since German reunification. Unity, freedom and solidarity – these are the big issues when it comes to commemorating – but also celebrating – the 30th anniversary of the German reunification on October 3. Our traditional ‘German weeks’, a series of events and small-scale activities under a common label that takes place all over Ukraine each year in autumn, will take up the theme. With this initiative the Embassy intends to support and showcase examples for practical German-Ukrainian cooperation and links between our societies on the local level. This year, we have invited partners to develop ideas for projects dealing with topics such as social and economic consequences of division and reunification, conflict resolution and reconciliation, freedom and equality. Be it a political panel discussion, a photography exhibition on the historical events or an essay competition for students – we are excited to see the results, offline and online.

All these historic experiences in the previous century – the war which Germany had started and devastated all of Europe, its liberation, the division of the European continent and finally the peaceful reunification – are the guiding principles for our engagement to support Ukraine: Neither do we accept an ongoing armed conflict on the European continent as a ‘new normal’ nor do we accept the illegal annexation or occupation of foreign territory. We believed that attempts to move international borders without mutual consent were ideas of a past we had long overcome – and we are still convinced that they are. That’s why we stand so firm and unequivocal in our position on Ukraine’s territorial integrity and national sovereignty.

Western and Eastern Germany were divided and separated for 40 years, a concrete wall and fences with watchtowers divided the German population for decades, numerous people died in their desperate attempts to cross it. After 40 years of division and separation Germans were so incredibly lucky to be reunited that it looks almost unimaginable in retrospect. Living in France at the time I remember watching the news that showed people on the Berlin Wall, completely incredulously. I had thought I would never live to see the Wall fall.

Speaking at Brandenburg gate on 9 November last year, Federal President Steinmeier acknowledged: *‘This great Wall, this inhumane construction which claimed so many victims, no longer stands. The Wall is gone, once and for all. [...] The Wall did not simply fall by itself, nor did reunification simply happen by itself – all of this was only possible because our neighbours throughout Europe placed renewed trust in us Germans after all the horrors for which this country had been responsible’.*

Based on this experience, few nations will understand the wish of Ukraine's citizens to reunite as much as we do. Therefore, we stand firm in our commitment to help Ukraine in its efforts to reintegrate its Eastern regions. The war in the East has claimed too many victims – and continues to do on a daily basis. This is why Germany – from Chancellor Merkel to our diplomatic staff – first of all support the negotiations for a sustained ceasefire at the line of contact. In November 2019 I had the privilege to accompany President Zelensky to Stanytsya Luhanska. Seeing the Check Point and the town itself impressed me deeply and made me want to work even harder for the war to end and for Ukraine and Ukrainians to be reunited.

Germany's engagement for Ukraine is not limited to these high-level political spheres. Over the past six years hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens benefited from Germany's engagement in Eastern Ukraine. To name just a few of the projects Germany financed and implemented here:

Our focus is on infrastructure both physical and social: better social services at state and municipal level, upgraded health care facilities and better equipped emergency response and rescue services improve the daily lives of 6.5 Mio. people in Eastern Ukraine, including 350,000 IDPs. 100 schools and kindergartens as well as 40 health care facilities have been renovated over the last years. 9,000 civil servants have been trained to provide better services for the citizens of Ukraine.

193,000 inhabitants in and around Mariupol benefited from the provision of and rehabilitation of water pipes and other installations; the same applies for other areas around the line of contact. A 150 Mio. Euro loan with favorable conditions is used to improve the regional electricity system and grid stability. Through a special fund supporting SMEs in the region 5,500 jobs were secured and additional 600 jobs created.

With 115 Mio. Euro spent, Germany is the second largest (the European Union is indeed the largest) provider of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, with a clear focus on improving the living conditions of IDPs. For them we financed construction of housing across Ukraine, improved nutrition of 188,000 IDPs, renovated schools, trained kindergarten staff and – very importantly – provided psychological treatment for children traumatized by the horrific events they had to endure.

Hundred severely wounded Ukrainian soldiers received special medical treatment in hospitals of the armed forces in Germany. By the end of last year the Ministry of Defence donated modern diagnostic equipment to Kyiv's military hospital.

In these days of the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic the cooperation between Germany and Ukraine grows even closer. In a joint effort we organized the evacuation of Ukrainian citizens from Nepal via Frankfurt and the mutual transfer of our citizens to their respective homeland. Germany donated equipment and shared experience in combating the virus. Ukraine's Antonov 225 Mriya – the pride

of Ukrainian aeronautics – flew record volumes of masks to Leipzig airport. To combat the wildfires which were simultaneously covering vast parts of Ukraine, we provided firefighting equipment within a few days.

We also share the common understanding that in order to overcome the global pandemic, we have to fight the virus and mitigate its economic and social effects in every municipality. The pandemic has proven that the path to decentralization and local self-government, which Germany vigorously supports, will strengthen Ukraine: self-confident citizens living in strong communities create a secure country. The higher the level of citizens' participation at the local level, the greater is the country's resilience against both internal and external shocks and challenges. As soon as conditions can be met, we will organize the football match between German and Ukrainian mayors which was actually envisaged for this year – as an expression of how closely we cooperate at every level.