

Yevhen PEREBYINIS,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of Ukraine to the Czech Republic*

‘THE CZECH REPUBLIC IS A CONSTANT AND ONE OF THE GREATEST ALLIES OF OUR COUNTRY’

– *Your Excellency, you have formerly worked as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to the Kingdom of Sweden and the Republic of Latvia and have repeatedly mentioned your personal close ties in the Czech Republic in interviews. Are there other countries in which you would like to perform your diplomatic duties?*

– It is true that the Czech Republic has pride of place in my diplomatic career. I speak Czech, I am well acquainted with the local mindset, history, and current policy. Besides, I have quite good contacts in the Czech Republic, particularly at a high political level, which gives me an opportunity to protect the interests of Ukraine efficiently and to ensure the support for our country in the international arena. That said, I gladly remember my work in Sweden and Latvia, the countries which are also remarkably close to my heart.

However, it would be inappropriate from my side to name particular countries in which I would like to work. Diplomatic service is somehow similar to the military one: The decision where and when you will be most helpful and effective is made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, finally, the President of Ukraine. The diplomat’s experience, his ties, knowledge of languages as well as the situation in the potential receiving state and the current challenges facing Ukraine are considered. Therefore, it is not about the desire or the absence of one but mostly about the necessity to perform the duties, which the national authorities entrust you with. But of course, the perfect situation is the equivalence between the needs of the state and your preferences. In such a case, the ambassador’s work is the most efficient.

– *How would you assess the current level of the Ukrainian-Czech bilateral cooperation?*

– Ukrainian-Czech relations are traditionally friendly mainly thanks to the long-lasting historical links between our countries. Despite all the difficulties and restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, our states have not ceased communication, although it was mandatory to adapt to unpredictable challenges and reorganise work through modern technologies and online communication tools.

Even in the circumstances of the epidemiological restrictions, I managed to maintain permanent contact with the Government of the Czech Republic, the Senate (the Upper House) and the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house) and directly with the leading officials of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thereby, we swiftly addressed all the issues arising in bilateral relations and agreed on joint actions within the framework of the work of international organisations.

Nowadays, the Czech Republic is awaiting decisive parliamentary elections, whose result will determine the direction of state development and policy for the next four years. It is obvious that both the pandemic and the parliamentary election campaign have set foreign policy aside. However, it has not affected the support for Ukraine in key directions, namely our struggle against Russian aggression and Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO. With regard to these issues, the Czech Republic is a constant and one of the greatest allies of our state, which supports the actions and aspirations of Ukrainians very clearly and unambiguously.

From my point of view, the current relations between Ukraine and the Czech Republic are the most positive and constructive in the entire recent history of Ukrainian-Czech cooperation, which was launched after the resumption of Ukrainian independence (1991) and the emergence of the Czech Republic as a result of the breakup of Czechoslovakia (1993). I am sure that our relations will develop in the same spirit in near future.

– *Which areas of cooperation between Ukraine and the Czech Republic, in your opinion, are a priority?*

– Bilateral relations between states are always a set of issues whose resolution requires a systematic approach. I am pleased to note that the current level of political dialogue between Ukraine and the Czech Republic and the general state of cooperation between our friendly countries provide an opportunity to constructively address any issue on the Ukrainian-Czech agenda.

The development of economic cooperation is currently of crucial importance, as it requires special attention in the circumstances of the global decline in economic indicators worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in spite of this, we have managed to maintain its potential and, in general, to achieve good results. The trade turnover between our states reached \$1,799 million in 2020, and in the first five months of 2021, trade volume has already increased by 79.2 percent, as compared to the same period last year. At the same time, Ukrainian export has increased by 97 percent. There is every reason to hope that 2021 will be a record year in terms of trade between Ukraine and the Czech Republic.

Ukraine and the Czech Republic effectively cooperate in international organisations, particularly the UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, as well as within the framework of our state's relations with the EU and NATO.

The support of the Czech Republic on this road is extremely important for us. In addition, Ukraine's interaction with regional organisations of which the Czech Republic is a member, particularly with the Visegrad Four, has significant prospects.

It should be noted that the Czech Republic demonstrates its solidarity and friendly support by providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine in 2020–2021 worth more than UAH 50 million to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

– *By the way, a few words on trade cooperation. In your opinion, in what areas is the potential of our relations not fully used? In what framework does the embassy cooperate with the Czech institutions responsible for trade relations, for example, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry?*

– There are still many areas in which we have significant untapped potential for cooperation between Ukraine and the Czech Republic. Firstly, we expect Ukraine's economic integration into the EU to encourage the expansion of production cooperation between Ukrainian and Czech enterprises as well as the active involvement of Czech business and investment in Ukraine. In this respect, we are vigorously cooperating with Ukrainian and Czech business associations, particularly the Chambers of Commerce of Ukraine and the Czech Republic. We have positive experience in holding several joint business events. The Exporters and Investors Council under the MFA of Ukraine is also actively involved in this process.

Ukraine and the Czech Republic have considerable opportunities to expand cooperation in traditional and high-tech sectors of the real economy and to augment trade in services.

We have prospects for strengthening bilateral cooperation in the energy sector. These include the participation of Ukrainian and Czech companies in joint projects for the modernisation and integration of Ukrainian electricity networks into the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity, improvement of the safety of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, technological upgrade of the oil and gas transportation system, development of renewable energy, improvement of energy efficiency, etc.

Ukraine and the Czech Republic can also significantly enhance transport cooperation, which will allow realising the transit potential of both countries by making full use of rail and road transport infrastructures and gradually liberalising transport relations, given the consistent implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

There are also opportunities for more active cooperation and implementation of projects in the agro-industrial sector, primarily in the context of increasing supplies of food products from Ukraine to the Czech market.

There is considerable scope for strengthening interregional cooperation, especially considering the ongoing reform of administrative decentralisation in Ukraine and the significant powers of Czech regions (*kraje*) in the socioeconomic

and financial spheres. In recent years, with the active support of the embassy, several cooperation agreements have been concluded between the regions and cities of Ukraine and the Czech Republic.

– *Mr Ambassador, the Czech Republic has consistently advocated for the maintenance of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, despite the pro-Russian sentiment of a part of the population and even President Miloš Zeman. What is the basis for such unwavering support of our state?*

– Above all, this support is based on the historical experience of the Czechs. In particular, I refer to the so-called 1938 Munich Agreement, when, with the tacit connivance of the European states, Hitler almost unimpededly seized part of Czechoslovakia, and also when the state was occupied by the troops of the Warsaw Pact countries in 1968. These historical traumas give the Czechs an opportunity to understand better than anyone else what Ukraine is going through: Russia's occupation of part of the territory and its armed aggression against our country. Many Czech politicians and ordinary people strongly support us in our struggle for which we are incredibly grateful.

With regard to the President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman: In fact, from time to time, he makes statements with which we cannot agree. I would not like to analyse the reasons for his position now. I will just say that foreign policy is led not by the President in the Czech Republic but the government. Thus, on the part of the current government of the Czech Republic, we feel full support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and, in particular, for the maintenance of the sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggressive actions in our state will be continued.

– *In April 2021, the Czech Republic accused Russia of being involved in the explosion in a Czech ammunition warehouse in 2014 and expelled part of the Russian diplomatic mission suspected of working for the Russian intelligence service. What do you think caused such a radical decision? Will the deterioration of relations with Russia affect cooperation between the Czech Republic and Ukraine?*

– Such a firm reaction stemmed from compelling evidence of the involvement of the Russian special services in the explosions in the Czech ammunition warehouse in October and December 2014, after which two Czech citizens died and the Czech Republic suffered substantial material damage. In recent years, relations between Russia and the Czech Republic have already been rather frosty due to a series of destructive actions by Russia against the Czech Republic. Apparently, following the logical and just actions of the Czech Republic, which consisted of expelling many Russian spies working under diplomatic disguise, these relations will be altogether frozen for a while.

By the way, Dmytro Kuleba, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, was one of the first foreign ministers to express solidarity with the Czech Republic in relation to these events. In his telephone conversation with his Czech counter-

part Jakub Kulhánek, he suggested redirecting Czech diplomats, whom Russia expelled in return, to Ukraine as a sign of support to strengthen the diplomatic presence of the Czech Republic in our state.

With regard to how this situation can affect Ukrainian-Czech relations, I would like to point out that we focus exclusively on common interests and priorities in our work with the Czech Republic and try to develop them so that they depend as little as possible on events in other countries, particularly in Russia.

– *The Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom has applied for the construction of a power unit at the Dukovany nuclear power plant, but the Czech government decided not to admit Rosatom to the tender procedure. At the same time, the Czech Republic is connected to the Nord Stream gas pipeline via the German Eugal pipeline. How would you assess the risks to Ukraine given the cooperation between Europe and Russia in the energy sector?*

– It is known that Ukraine is categorically opposes the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline bypassing the traditional and reliable Ukrainian route for transporting gas to Europe. Not only does this project contradict the EU energy strategy to diversify sources of supply but also could strengthen Gazprom's monopolistic position on the European gas market. In general, if the pipeline does work, it will significantly weaken the security not only of Ukraine but whole Europe.

– *The Czech Republic is a state that has transformed from a post-Soviet republic into an influential EU and NATO member state. What could Ukraine learn from the experience of the Czech Republic on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration?*

– The Armed Forces of Ukraine are now actively adopting NATO standards. The experience of the Czech Republic is primarily of interest to us in the field of logistics. By 2020, there existed a NATO Logistics and Standardisation Trust Fund. The fund's activities were aimed at supporting the process of reforming the relevant systems of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Czech Republic was one of the countries which headed it. This matter remains relevant.

In addition, Ukraine is interested in Czech assistance to reform the Ukrainian Military Law Enforcement Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, involving the experience of NATO countries' military police.

Furthermore, the Czech side shares with us its experience in the field of military medicine. The Russian occupying forces do not stop the daily bombings of our units, which, regrettably, cause casualties, both dead and maimed. Therefore, military doctors perform extremely important work and foreign experience is always necessary here.

– *Your Excellency, could you tell us about the Ukrainian-Czech cooperation in the military-technical field and define the main challenges in this area.*

– Military-technical cooperation is a peculiar area of relations and access to such information is largely limited. Without going into details, I can say that

the Czech Republic is one of our main partners in this field. The Czech Republic is one of the few countries in the world to abolish all legislative and technical obstacles to the export of military-industrial complex products to Ukraine in 2017. This cooperation is developing in a very vibrant and mutually beneficial manner. In addition, work continues on several joint projects on enhancing the combat capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

– *In 2020, the countries of the Visegrad Four, including the Czech Republic, initiated projects within the framework of the V4 East Solidarity Programme for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries with a view to contributing to the European development of the EaP states. What are the accomplishments of this programme?*

– I would like to emphasise that this programme was launched precisely during the Czech presidency of the Visegrad Four. On 8 April 2020, the Visegrad Group Joint Statement was adopted in which they indicated that € 250,000 had been allocated for the financing of the assistance programme for the EaP states. These funds were mainly directed towards the practical strengthening of the medical, social, and economic stability of vulnerable groups of the population in the EaP countries affected by the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Ukraine, the implementation of the projects under this programme was focused on two main regions: Chernivtsi Region, which was most affected by the spread of COVID-19 for a long time, and Luhansk Region, which now has a weakened medical infrastructure. The beneficiaries include the Chernivtsi Regional Clinical Hospital, the Chernivtsi City Hospital No. 1, the Luhansk Regional Children's Clinical Hospital in Lysychansk, and the Luhansk Regional Cardiology Dispensary. In addition, these funds have helped to provide emergency medical assistance at the Stanytsia Luhanska checkpoint, enabling the supply of relevant equipment to these medical facilities and support for the staff working in the difficult conditions of the pandemic.

– *Ukrainian workers are in quite a high demand among Czech employers. What difficulties do Ukrainians encounter at the time of employment? What measures does the embassy take to address illegal recruitment?*

– According to the Czech Statistical Office, around 180,000 Ukrainians officially reside in the Czech Republic today. Nearly half of them came to seek employment. Our citizens who participate in official government programmes to that effect, such as the Ukraine Regime or the Ukraine Project, do not usually face any serious problems. They work mainly within the framework of officially signed employment contracts, have a guaranteed wage and health insurance; they are fully socially protected. In the meantime, many people accept the proposals of dubious employment agencies and unscrupulous facilitators in order to avoid going through rather complicated

and long-term bureaucratic procedures. As a result, these citizens become victims of fraudsters without receiving the money they earn. They are often expelled from the territory of the Czech Republic due to illegal employment. Even though we try to carry out active outreach work in order to convince our citizens not to use facilitator services, unfortunately, these cases remain common.

When citizens contact us regarding the violation of their rights, consuls make every effort to assist those people within the scope of our purview. In particular, we endeavour to solve the problem directly with the employer. It works very often and citizens receive their earned money. Otherwise, we prepare an appeal to the competent Czech authorities. If there is nothing else left to restore justice but to go to court, we can recommend experienced lawyers to our citizens.

– Many Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic unite in various non-governmental organisations and are actively involved in the cultural and educational sphere. What accomplishments of the embassy together with the diaspora can you share?

– In fact, the Czech Republic is home to more than 20 Ukrainian NGOs, including four Saturday schools. The embassy has established close and constructive cooperation with all of these organisations. A Coordinating Council of Heads of Ukrainian Public Organisations is functioning at the embassy. In its regular meetings, we discuss issues of interest to all Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, coordinate steps, and agree on plans for further activities.

During the pandemic, there are naturally fewer Ukrainian cultural and informational events in the Czech Republic, but the life of the diaspora was highly active here before the pandemic. They organised different events almost every day; sometimes we even had to choose where to go because events took place almost simultaneously. I am convinced that as soon as the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic are lifted, the full life of the Ukrainian in the Czech Republic will be quickly restored.

I would also like to emphasise that the embassy, together with the organisations of the Ukrainian diaspora, is exerting major efforts to preserve the memory of the outstanding Ukrainians buried in the Czech Republic. In view of this, in cooperation with the non-governmental organisation Ukrainian Memorial, we have managed to collect and systematise information about the burial sites of Ukrainians there. The result is an electronic catalogue available on the website: <http://www.ukrmemorial.eu/>. In addition, during the period of 2017–2020, we cleaned 37 Ukrainian memorial sites in the territory of the Czech Republic. These include Ukrainian memorials and burial sites in the cities of Prague, Poděbrady, Liberec, Brno, Příbram, Pardubice, Hradec Králové, Josefov, and Mělník.

– *Ukrainian youth often choose the Czech Republic for higher education. In your view, what are the reasons for such interest of Ukrainian graduates? What would you advise them?*

– Right you are. In 2020, more than 3,600 students from Ukraine studied in the Czech Republic, and this number continues to grow. Ukrainian students are attracted mainly by the fact that if you study in the Czech language, education is free for foreigners in the Czech Republic. In addition, education is of remarkably high quality: Czech diplomas are recognised in almost all countries of the world, giving graduates of higher educational institutions ample career opportunities not only in the Czech Republic but also beyond. The linguistic proximity, the convenient geographical position of the Czech Republic in the centre of Europe, the country's rich cultural heritage, and high quality of life also play a role. At the same time, we are interested in returning our young people to Ukraine upon completion of their studies in the Czech Republic for them to apply the knowledge obtained to the development of their state.

– *The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on diplomacy and has given states an impetus to the search for new forms of activity. Was it difficult to readjust the work of the embassy?*

– The pandemic has become a major challenge for us. Due to the coronavirus, we have been forced to abandon most of the usual formats of our work – not only bilateral visits, business forums and committee meetings but also to rethink the traditional forms of the representation of Ukrainian culture abroad: for example, participation in the Prague Book Fair or the holding of a Ukrainian film festival. Almost all of the work, if possible, had to be transferred online. While this format has, of course, some advantages, however, nothing can substitute personal communication among people. We therefore hope to return to the usual order of work at the earliest convenience.

During the period of the greatest aggravation of the pandemic in March – April 2020, the embassy had to make significant efforts to evacuate our citizens from the Czech Republic, who were unable to return home because of the closure of the borders. Then we managed to organise the sending of thousands of Ukrainians to Ukraine by airplanes, trains, and buses and to help those who have stayed with accommodation and food.

The work of the consular section of the embassy also had to be realigned. In order to avoid crowds and minimise the risk of infection, we had to completely refuse to receive citizens on a so-called first-come, first-served basis. All visitors must register online for a certain time and day.

– *Mr Ambassador, what plans and prospects of activity does the Embassy of Ukraine to the Czech Republic have for the coming years?*

– The main tasks of the embassy, just as those of any other Ukrainian institution overseas, are to represent Ukraine in the receiving state, to maintain official

relations, to protect the national interests of Ukraine, and to perform consular functions, including the protection of the rights and interests of citizens and legal entities of Ukraine abroad.

The invariable strategic objective for us in the near future is, of course, to ensure the support of the Czech Republic in the two areas already indicated: the fight against Russian aggression and Ukraine's path towards integration into the EU and NATO. In this respect, the priority of our work will include the coordination of actions with the Government of the Czech Republic, which will be formed on the basis of the parliamentary elections in the country in October 2021, concerning the interests of Ukraine during the forthcoming Presidency of the Czech Republic in the Council of the European Union in the latter half of 2022.