

Volodymyr SHKUROV,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of Ukraine to the Republic of Albania*

WE ARE MOTIVATED JUST LIKE EVERY UKRAINIAN WHO YEARN FOR WHAT MATTERS MOST

– *The Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Albania was opened recently, in 2020, with you becoming its first Head of Mission. Please tell us about your experience setting up the operation of the Embassy.*

– I would like to specify one important detail right away. Indeed, as the first (Resident) Ambassador of Ukraine to the Republic of Albania, I presented my letters of credence to the then President of Albania, Ilir Meta, upon my arrival in Tirana at the end of August 2020. It was then that I officially assumed my duties as the Ambassador of Ukraine to Albania. However, at that time, the Embassy had neither the premises nor the staff in Tirana; thus, I had to get started from ground zero. Therefore, I based myself in a hotel and began the Ukrainian Embassy's work by addressing essential issues. The very first thing I had to do was find premises, equip them to suit the needs of the mission, procure office equipment and furniture, sign the necessary contracts, open bank accounts and prepare banking details for the newly established diplomatic mission, arrange medical insurance, etc. Remember that the beginning of the Embassy's work also coincided with the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, all the necessary measures were taken with the utmost urgency. During that difficult period, several official delegations from Ukraine visited Tirana, and I think they appreciated that our Ukrainian Embassy was operating and its operation was efficient. Its first staff members arrived in Tirana in the second half of October 2020. Together we finished equipping the premises of the Embassy and the Consulate and set up the work of our diplomatic mission. The Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Albania became fully operational on 1 February 2021, when we raised the Ukrainian flag over the main building of the Embassy and commenced active work. Among other things, we also launched the Consular Section, which provides all types of consular services.

– *Ukrainians are very grateful to Albania for the support granted to our state since 24 February 2022, including the simplification of entry and granting of asylum to the people who had to abandon their homes because of the war. How did Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine impact the perception of Ukrainians and Ukraine in Albania? What difficulties have you had to overcome in protecting the interests of local Ukrainians?*



Посол України Володимир Шкуров вручив адресовану колективу готелю «Рогнер» та його власнику, пану Роберту Рогнеру, подяку за солідарність з українським народом у війні проти російського агресора та партнерську підтримку під час проведення першої в Албанії презентації традиційної української кухні в межах благодійного проекту «Об'єднані заради спасіння дітей війни України»

Ambassador of Ukraine Volodymyr Shkurov presented a letter of gratitude to the staff of the Rogner Hotel and its owner, Mr Robert Rogner, for their solidarity with the Ukrainian people in the war against the Russian aggressor and partner support during the first presentation of traditional Ukrainian cuisine in Albania under the charity project United to Save the Ukrainian Children of War

– The Government of Albania and its people perceived the fact of Russian aggression against Ukraine with great sorrow and have shown powerful political support for and solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Their support reflected both in bilateral and multilateral Ukrainian-Albanian relations, especially in Albania's actions in the UN Security Council and other influential international organisations. Ordinary Albanians were keen to assist our Embassy in collecting aid for Ukraine: medicines, clothing, food, toiletries, etc. We set up a humanitarian headquarters at the Embassy and sent over two hundred tonnes of supplies to different regions of our country using our own resources. Moreover, the Government of Albania has extended financial and military support to Ukraine (munitions, hardware, ammunition, etc.).

Albania has simplified the entry conditions for Ukrainians, allowing our citizens to reside in its territory under the temporary protection status. Specifically, on 18 March 2022, the state ruled that Ukrainians could stay on its territory for one year from the date of crossing the border without the need to obtain any



Надзвичайний і Повноважний Посол України Володимир Шкуров і генеральний виконавчий директор Органу фінансового нагляду Республіки Албанія Ервін Мете. Під час зустрічі обговорили вдосконалення функціонування фінансового сектору двох держав та перспективи розвитку українсько-албанської співпраці

Volodymyr Shkurov, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine, and Ervin Mete, General Executive Director of the Financial Supervisory Authority of the Republic of Albania. During the meeting, they discussed the improvement of the performance of the financial sectors of the two countries and the prospects for the development of Ukrainian-Albanian cooperation

permits. On 24 May 2023, that term was extended for another year. According to official 2021 data, there were 104 Ukrainian citizens with residence permits in the territory of Albania. About 6,000 more of our citizens came to Albania after 24 February 2022. Needless to say, the number of appeals to the Embassy has also noticeably increased, as we are the first institution Ukrainians contact after crossing the border. Our citizens address us about various problems, ranging from difficulties encountered while crossing the border, as many people have left Ukraine with internal passports, all the way to private and everyday issues. In all instances, Ukrainians receive appropriate help from us, along with consular and legal support. We adequately resolve all pending problems our citizens face, even when there is a need for additional intervention (primarily in the case of Ukrainians with health issues). We have not encountered any extraordinary difficulties in protecting the interests of Ukrainian citizens in Albania; we handle everything adequately and as timely as possible.

– *Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has negatively impacted the economic ties between Ukraine and Albania. Your Excellency, what are the prospects for bilateral economic relations in the nearest future? Could Albania join the post-war recovery of Ukraine?*

Unfortunately, it is true that Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has undermined economic relations between our states. It has disrupted the well-established logistics and significantly hampered the performance of the tourism sector, which is very important for Ukrainian-Albanian relations. The economy of Albania itself has suffered accelerated inflation and recessionary processes.

According to the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, in 2022, the volume of trade in goods between Ukraine and Albania totalled USD 34.61 million (↓18.4% compared to 2021), of which exports amounted to USD 24.35 million and imports amounted to USD 10.35 million (↓33%). Ukraine's foreign trade surplus reached USD 14.09 million.

As we look at the dynamics of the current year, the same data show that in January–March 2023, the volume of trade in goods between the countries amounted to USD 12.7 million, of which USD 6.887 million were exports and USD 5.815 million were imports. Ukraine's foreign trade surplus reached USD 1.072 million.

As you can see, the situation is rather challenging, but progress is being made. As of now, there has been a notable rise in bilateral business contacts through the Nazovni system and a significant increase in the number of businesses looking for opportunities to establish cooperation that would benefit all parties in areas such as trade, energy, industrial agriculture, construction, education, culture, and regional development.

Trade and economic relations between Ukraine and Albania have considerable potential, and both countries are determined to make the most of it to increase bilateral trade.

In this context, agriculture remains one of the most important sectors in our relations. Albania has impressive capabilities, but Ukraine is also capable of increasing its exports across a range of product groups. Specifically, we are interested in increasing exports of grain and other agricultural products to the Albanian market. In addition to the grain itself, boosting exports of packaged refined



Зустріч Посла з Дефрімом Гомою, який очолює Албанський орден фармацевтів, що від початку війни вкотре надає українцям допомогу: великі партії необхідних ліків, які вже було доставлено до Києва, Харкова, Запоріжжя

The Ambassador met with Dëfrim Goma, head of the Albanian Order of Pharmacists, which was providing its most recent package of aid since the beginning of the war, namely large batches of essential medicines, which are already delivered to Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia



Зустріч Посла Володимира Шкурова з українськими дітьми на День святого Миколая. Посол привітав малечу та передав їм подарунки

Ambassador Volodymyr Shkurov met with Ukrainian children on St Nicholas Day. The Ambassador congratulated the children and offered them gifts

sunflower oil, margarine, and special oils can prove to be another promising area. Ukrainian dairy processing companies also have great resources and are ready to offer high-quality dried dairy products, canned milk, hard cheese, and long-storage milk. Amidst the technological shifts in the industrial agriculture of both countries, we can talk about the prospects for introducing new technologies, creating opportunities for sustainable rural development, and financing and resource support for agricultural production.

Taking into account the nature of martial law, we are currently continuing to prepare the inaugural meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation. We are also working on developing the regulatory framework and establishing bilateral institutional mechanisms to remove technical obstacles to trade and intensify economic relations between our countries.

As for post-war reconstruction, I would like to note that Albania has already been involved in Ukraine's post-war recovery, primarily at the regional level. We have two projects supported by the Albanian side, namely:

1. On 6 July 2022, during a special session of the Tirana City Council, its members decided to reconstruct Kharkiv School No. 5 as a means of helping the sister city. The relevant operational consultations are currently underway.

2. On 15 June 2022, Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama, during his meeting with President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, offered assistance in the

post-war reconstruction of residential buildings in the city of Irpin. During the London Conference on the Reconstruction of Ukraine, which took place on 21–22 June 2023, Albanian Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Olta Xhaçka confirmed Albania's readiness to build the Balkan Quarter in Irpin together with other Western Balkan countries: the Republic of North Macedonia and Montenegro. The parties are currently negotiating the main parameters of such cooperation.

I trust that both projects will be implemented in the near future.

– *Albania has had candidate status for European Union membership for over nine years; in July 2022, Tirana and Brussels commenced accession negotiations. What are the lessons from the Albanian experience of European integration that you believe could prove helpful to Ukraine on its own path towards the EU? How could Tirana and Kyiv cooperate in the area of European integration?*

– On 15 June 2022, in Kyiv, President Zelenskyy and Prime Ministers of Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro adopted a joint statement in support of Ukraine's aspiration towards European integration. Thus, Albania declared its support and readiness to cooperate in the context of our European integration processes. The process of Albanian EU accession has been rather challenging and lengthy. Yet over the past two years, the country has been making steady progress towards becoming a full-fledged member of the European Union. Albania's experience is interesting and helpful for us, given that the effectiveness of European integration largely depends on the success of reforms, which makes it imperative to study the procedures, mechanisms, and laws adopted by Albania to achieve alignment with EU criteria. Furthermore, their experience in anti-corruption and judicial reforms and in improving mechanisms for cooperation with national minorities and civil society might also prove helpful to us. I see promise in the development of Ukrainian-Albanian cooperation under various European programmes for the development of transport corridors, energy supply networks, links between the seaports of our states, and also in the educational and cultural fields, which offer a wealth of opportunities for fostering European standards and values.

– *As is known, russian narratives and propaganda are rather prevalent across the Western Balkan region. What measures does the Embassy take to counter those influences?*

– Unlike some other Western Balkan countries, Albania firmly adheres to the course of partnership with the United States and the European Union. Russian narratives and propaganda have no meaningful influence in Albania. Nevertheless, that does not prevent their occasional manifestations here, to which, to be sure, our Embassy responds as appropriate. Specifically, we have a tried and tested procedure for officially informing the Albanian authorities about Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, Ukraine's political agenda in the



У Посольстві України в Албанії послы країн Європейського Союзу та голова делегації ЄС у Тирані Крістіане Гогманн зустрілися з Послом Володимиром Шкуровим, щоб висловити свою солідарність з Україною у боротьбі проти російського агресора

At the Embassy of Ukraine in Albania, Ambassadors of the European Union member states and Christiane Hohmann, Head of the EU Delegation to Tirana, met with Ambassador Volodymyr Shkurov to express their solidarity with Ukraine in the fight against the russian aggressor

international arena, and all the important aspects of the life of the Ukrainian people. In this respect, the Embassy is strongly represented on Albanian social media and national television. We have functional work contacts with the Albanian mass media, which allow us to convey accurate information to the Albanian audience. In this context, friendly personal relations with representatives of the Albanian state authorities, colleagues from the diplomatic corps, and public figures have also taken on great importance. We pay great attention to conducting various exhibitions, mass demonstrations, public speeches, etc.

Since the start of russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Albania has declared its unwavering support for our state's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Following russia's full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territory, the Republic of Albania condemned russia's actions at all levels of the political establishment and has consistently joined all EU sanctions packages against the russian federation. First of all, it is worth recognising Albania's role as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Together with the US, Albania addresses the issues of Ukraine, supports pro-Ukrainian initiatives and co-sponsors all resolutions related to Ukraine.

On 7 March 2022, the Parliament of Albania adopted a resolution entitled ‘On Supporting Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Ukraine and Protecting the Principles of International Law and European Security’. On the same day, the Tirana City Hall approved a decision to rename the street where the Embassies of Kosovo, Serbia, Ukraine, and Switzerland are located; it is now called Free Ukraine. Coincidentally, that street was also the address of the Russian embassy, which, as you might guess, has since changed its location.

During the NATO Summit in Vilnius on 11–12 July 2023, the Prime Minister of Albania noted that Putin’s approval rating in the country was 0.7–1%, which, he believed, was only natural given Albania’s difficult communist experience in the past. In other words, we now have the full sympathy and support of the entire Albanian public. And this speaks about our joint efforts to counter Russian narratives and propaganda.

– *The Embassy frequently organises various events to promote the positive image of Ukraine and increase the awareness of Albanians about what is happening in our state. Please, tell us about the results of the Embassy’s activities and completed projects in the sphere of public diplomacy.*

From the very start of our Embassy’s operation, a large part of our efforts has been directed to cultural diplomacy measures, which are integral in promoting a positive image of Ukraine and enhancing friendly relations between the two countries.

Over two and a half years, we have organised more than fifty public diplomacy events, including art exhibitions and displays, performances by our dance troupes, participation in various contests, festivals, and sports competitions, screenings of Ukrainian films, etc. It should be noted that most of those events are charity events, such as opera concerts, presentations of Ukrainian cuisine and numerous sporting events, the proceeds from which were sent to Ukraine.

In line with the initiatives of First Lady Olena Zelenska, we have already opened four Ukrainian bookshelves in the central libraries of Albanian cities: Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, and Korçë. More work is ongoing. Thanks to the introduction of a Ukrainian-language audio guide, the Museum of Medieval Art in Korçë began to speak the native language of Ukrainians in Albania.

We are also working on a project of placing a monument to Taras Shevchenko in the park on the already-mentioned Free Ukraine Street. I hope we will be celebrating the next birthday of the Great Kobzar near his monument.

Cultural diplomacy remains an effective method of promoting Ukraine’s national interests and achieving our country’s foreign policy goals. It helps us build relations of friendship, trust, and partnership between our countries and peoples.

– *In May 2023, Ukrainian Nikopol and Albanian Elbasan entered into a memorandum of cooperation. What are the prospects for developing relations between*

the regions of Ukraine and Albania, and what role does the Embassy play in such processes?

– Indeed, the memorandum has been signed. The next step is to implement its provisions in practice. Both sides are working on this now.

We already have four signed memoranda of cooperation: Kharkiv – Tirana, Kyiv – Tirana, Kharkiv Regional Military Administration – the County of Fier, and Nikopol District Council – Regional Council of Elbasan. At the same time, we are making preparations for signing two more memoranda: between the cities of Khotyn and Berat and between Mykolaiv and Durrës.

The choice of a partner city is essential in this context, considering its impact on further interaction and development of cooperation. The Embassy thoroughly reviews each request from our cities concerning the search for a partner in Albania and analyses the specific capabilities of the regions, e.g., economy, industry, cultural nuances, etc.

Interregional cooperation facilitates people-to-people contacts, enhances bilateral trade and economic cooperation, cultural and humanitarian exchange, and helps to increase the number of joint projects. It all brings our countries and people closer together, which is one of the main tasks of the Embassy.

We are doing our best with very limited human resources, but we are motivated just like every Ukrainian who yearns for what matters most: victory over the enemy and the return of peace to the Ukrainian people.