

## UNDERSTANDING SOUTHEAST ASIA

– *Most states of the Global South are known for their neutrality regarding the Russian war against Ukraine. Few among those countries provide humanitarian aid, let alone military; nevertheless, they mostly condemn the Russian invasion and support pro-Ukrainian resolutions in the UN. In your opinion, what is holding those countries back from extending their support for Kyiv; do you deem it possible to persuade Malaysia and the Philippines to support Ukraine more actively?*

– First of all, when we bring up the Global South, it is just our generalisation. In fact, those are very different countries of a very diverse region, and each country or group of countries has its own interests. Therefore, I would not conflate the Philippines and Malaysia in this respect. It just so happens that we are responsible for the Philippines, Malaysia, and Timor-Leste, but each of those three countries has its own interests and its own position. What do they have in common? For all of them, the war is somewhere far away and does not directly concern their business.

China is the region's hegemon, and those countries wish to avoid aggravating relations with Beijing, which, for most of them, are quite strained to begin with. We are talking about both China's economic influence and its expansionist policy, especially in certain areas of the South China Sea that are subject to territorial disputes between the adjacent states. Our most supportive ASEAN members are Singapore and the Philippines. Singapore, unlike the Philippines, even joined the sanctions. However, the Philippines is a country culturally very different from the rest of ASEAN: firstly, it has a Christian background, and secondly, it is significantly influenced by Japan and the United States but also strongly (chiefly economically) by China. Yet the influence of the latter is fading since PRC is not making the concessions very much desired by the newly elected President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Last year, he tried to intensify relations with Beijing and held an important state visit, which ran with great fanfare but brought about no practical concessions or reciprocal steps from the Chinese side. This led to the so-called honeymoon period in Philippine relations with the US, and Washington de facto regained all the ground it had lost under the previous Philippine administration, with which there had been disagreements over human rights issues. The US obtained access to four more Philippine military bases (of which there are now nine) and increased its military and economic presence. The involvement of Korea, Japan, and Israel as



Підписання меморандуму про взаєморозуміння між платформою «Nazovni» та Торгово-промисловою палатою Філіппін

Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Nazovni platform and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry

arms suppliers is also growing. Therefore, when it comes to the Philippines, we have a good chance of getting more than just their support at the UN.

Why do all the countries in the region support us at the UN? The main reason is that they cannot permit the final destruction of the system of international law that protects them from potential aggression by their big neighbours. I am referring to Indonesia and China, which might exercise their powerful influence to resolve economic or territorial disputes as they see fit. So, I would not say that their support at the UN and its specialised agencies is tantamount to support for Ukraine. They support the rule of law, condemning the Russian Federation's actions aimed at destroying the present system.

Countries in the region are more focused on specific projects. They are not much predisposed to provide humanitarian aid. For example, Malaysia declares that it supports all oppressed Muslims of the world, including the Rohingya and Afghans, but that aid is capped at tens of thousands of dollars. Ukraine received USD 60,000 from the country through the Red Cross and Red Crescent system, and that is truly a lot for Malaysia. Involving the countries of the region in Ukraine's economic recovery and food security projects would be a welcome step, and we are working in this direction. Of course, our efforts were undermined by Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative on 17 July 2023. Should grain exports from Ukraine continue, I think we will be able to increase them to the Philippines and Malaysia too.



Участь Тимчасового повіреного Дениса Михайлюка в конференції, під час якої було висвітлено ситуацію в Україні та роботу ДСНС України

Chargé d'Affaires ad interim Dmytro Mykhailiuk takes part in the conference, where the situation in Ukraine and the work of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine were covered

Since the beginning of the war, exports have fallen significantly: to the Philippines by almost 95%, to Malaysia by a little less. We are working to ensure that Kuala Lumpur cannot intensify cooperation with Russia the way China and India do, seeking to maximise profits from grain exports, semiconductors, etc. Malaysia, formally a member of several Western alliances, cannot afford to do so openly; hence, it neither joins the sanctions nor maintains state-level contacts with Russia. Even so, over the year, they signed memoranda in the spheres of space and agriculture. We, of course, emphasise the unacceptability of such a policy and are trying to intensify cooperation in these sectors ourselves. In agriculture, we are not yet as successful as we would like to be – we are not getting boycotted, but the progress we make is slow. As for space exploration and aviation, our chances are better since we have projects that launched before the war (even before the 2019 coronavirus pandemic), so we do hope for success here. In addition, Malaysia is a fairly wealthy country with oil revenues, and it wants not only to join the club of space powers but also become a technological leader in ASEAN, given its achievements in semiconductor production and 5G technology development.

The Philippines, I think, could cooperate with us on computer security projects. The country has a specialised ministry; we have offered them our Prozorro e-system,

Diia portal, and a product for remote sensing analysis. The Philippine side is currently considering those, and I expect the cooperation will be successful.

I must note that Timor-Leste is not yet a member of ASEAN – it will join next year. By the way, although it is the poorest country in Asia, it has provided Ukraine with more humanitarian aid than the Philippines or Malaysia. The government donated USD 1.5 million to the UN World Food Programme to help Ukrainians. That is a significant contribution compared to the moral support from the Philippines and USD 60,000 from Malaysia. Besides, we receive small (compared to what Western countries have provided) but still significant assistance from private entities. Malaysia is a major producer of medical gloves, and we have received several containers from the manufacturers through hubs in Poland and Türkiye.

– *Malaysia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste are countries that were once colonies. In addition, the majority of the Malaysian population is Muslim. Are you trying to work with common historical and cultural grounds to convey information about the war? For instance, explain that Ukraine is suffering from russian colonialism, and Crimean Tatars, who profess Islam, are being oppressed in the occupied territories. What narratives can Ukraine promote in this regard? Please tell us whether russian propaganda holds a firm foothold in the countries where the Embassy represents Ukraine.*

– The easiest situation is in Timor-Leste. Firstly, there is less russian propaganda there; secondly, they still remember Ukraine well because Ukrainian peacekeepers (police forces) were there in 2002 when Timor-Leste was restoring its independence. That is why it is the friendliest and most supportive country to us.

Malaysia, sadly, is awash with russian narratives that are rooted in the perception of the Soviet Union. Most people there still do not understand that Ukraine is neither the Soviet Union nor russia, and sincerely believe that Ukraine had been part of russia until 1991. To explain to them the difference between the russian federation and the Soviet Union, it takes looking for a political scientist or historian. The narrative that russia is fighting against the West is very strong in Malaysia. Even though the country is closely integrated into the economic chains and economic paradigm of the Western world, the anti-Western narrative is very potent here. Malaysians are not fond of the Americans, although they perceive their former colonial oppressors [the UK] more favourably. They have a relatively positive attitude towards European countries, but their perception of the United States is very negative. Unfortunately, the prevailing notion is that Ukraine is a US puppet, which is being exploited to weaken russia.

Another damaging narrative for us portrays Ukraine as a Zionist state fighting against Muslim russia. Within this narrative, the latter actively exploits the Jewish origin of the President of Ukraine and fake news about ‘support’ from Israel



Візит ввічливості з Міністром оборони Філіппін

Courtesy call with the Minister of Defence of the Philippines

(to tell the truth, it would have been better if it were true). They also claim that Russia is a Muslim-majority state fighting against the Zionist fascists. In Malaysia, coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war is mostly the reprinting of materials from major information agencies, either pro-Ukrainian or neutral. However, those are not meant for the local audience but for those who are generally aware of the situation.

We try to communicate the fact that there are approximately 2 million Muslims in Ukraine, and Crimean Tatars are one of the oppressed ethnic groups. In particular, the visit of Tamila Tasheva, the Permanent Representative of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, contributed to the dissemination of information. The main challenge is the long distance between our countries, so we cannot initiate such important awareness-raising events on a regular basis.

We cooperate with Muslim organisations, including youth ones, and are also present in the print media. Although there are four of us in the Embassy and Russians outnumber us almost twenty to one, we are working. We are assisted by our partners; the Americans are not very involved, while the Europeans try to help us as much as possible in strengthening our capabilities.

I would not say that Russian propaganda in Malaysia is aggressive, but it is clever, unfortunately. For this purpose, they use young people who received their education in Indonesia and speak Bahasa Indonesia, wear national Ma-

Malaysian clothes, and are active on Twitter and TikTok. We, in our turn, spread information about Russia's atrocities in Chechnya, about the Muslims fighting in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Chechens who opposed the Russian Federation; we present the culture of the Crimean Tatar people, organise photo exhibitions jointly with Muslim youth organisations, deliver lectures, hold roundtables, etc. Last year, Oleksii Haran, Full Professor at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, gave seminars in Malaysia, and Yurii Kovryzhenko, the ambassador of Ukrainian cuisine in the world, visited Malaysia on the Independence Day of Ukraine to present modern Ukrainian fusion-style dishes. Malaysians still often recall that event. Those initiatives are very beneficial and well-attended since such events do not happen often. In general, Malaysians are very friendly and ever-curious to learn something new.

However, the result of those activities may not be that significant, as the majority of the population only cares about local issues. For example, 40–50% of Malaysians are only interested in... finding chicken and rice at an affordable price. By the way, we also take this into consideration, as costs for chicken have risen, in particular, due to the lack of Ukrainian corn on the global market, which is used as feed. We manage, somehow. I think it would have been worse if we were not here.

In the Philippines, Russian propaganda is much more aggressive since, unlike Malaysia, there is no censorship and there are plenty of opportunities to speak in the mass media, and you do not even have to pay for anything because the market there is very competitive.

However, the sentiments of the Filipino people are on our side. The Russian embassy in the Philippines simply rebroadcasts Moscow's narratives without taking into account the specifics of the audience. In addition, our partners, Canada and the United States, are actively opposing them. Therefore, it is not that difficult there. Sometimes we do not even respond to the nonsense they publish in order to focus on things that are more important.

At the beginning of the full-scale war, we had the same situation here in Malaysia: the Russian embassy was trying to retransmit propaganda and fake information from the Kremlin. We repeatedly lodged complaints with the police, and it ended.

Timor-Leste, for its part, is very interested in us, but the remoteness of the country hinders cooperation. Unfortunately, it is rarely possible to write stand-alone articles because there are not that many of us here. But giving interviews is much easier.

*– Although the Ukrainian community in Malaysia is small (approximately half a thousand people), in 2017, with the Embassy's support, the Ministry of Home Affairs of Malaysia registered the Ukrainian Cultural Association NGO. What does its work involve? How does the Embassy cooperate with it?*

– In Malaysia, registering a non-governmental organisation is not that easy, so we stepped in to help. Currently, there are about 300 Ukrainian citizens here, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there were only 200 because their long-term visas were not extended, and most Ukrainians who had no business ties with the locals left. The main goal of the Ukrainian Cultural Association is to spread information about Ukraine, its culture, and its needs to the local communities. We engage the organisation in almost all our cultural events, create joint projects, and take part in fairs, festivals, etc. The Association also holds its own events and cooperates with embassies in Kuala Lumpur; They even celebrated St Nicholas Day with the Czech and Polish embassies.

– *In November 2022, the District Court of The Hague ruled that it was russian-backed militants who shot down the Malaysian flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. Among the 298 victims of the crash, 43 had Malaysian citizenship. Do Malaysians remember the tragedy? Do they see it as related to the current war?*

– This is a complicated and sensitive question. They do remember it, albeit selectively. The Prime Minister at the time was Mahathir Mohamad, a very influential but pro-russian politician. There is still a widespread belief among the Malaysian public that Ukraine hit the Boeing 777. Even though it is a proven fact that the plane was shot down by a missile fired from a russian Buk anti-aircraft missile system (investigators consider that it was brought from russia and then taken out after the attack), the local media still insist that ‘Ukrainian separatists’ are the ones to blame. The media do not report false information but use the available data in such a way as to skirt around accusing the russian federation. If possible, they will say nothing at all, rendering the public free to believe that the Ukrainians downed the plane. Of course, we emphasise whenever we can that it was the first crime and the first foreign victims of the russian-Ukrainian war, and specific audiences can understand that. We hope to obtain the rights to screen the *Iron Butterflies* film and show it to Malaysians.

– *Malaysia’s economy is developing very rapidly. The country is one of the regional and global leaders among manufacturers of electronic chips and micro-circuits and exporters of agricultural raw materials. Malaysia is also one of the largest exporters of oil and liquefied natural gas in Southeast Asia. What are the prospects for economic cooperation between Kyiv and Kuala Lumpur?*

– We need to establish joint ventures with Malaysia, preferably high-tech ones. Our space, remote sensing, and satellite data analysis technologies will enjoy demand. If Antonov Company proves up to the task, we may even be able to launch a joint production of aircraft. Malaysia also has a well-developed spare parts industry for Boeing and Airbus aeroplanes.

Our traditional sector, which unfortunately heavily depends on transport corridors, is food products, preferably with higher added value. We have tried to export confectionery because it is quite popular in Muslim countries.



Міст у синьо-жовтих кольорах у Куала-Лумпурі, столиці Малайзії

Blue and yellow bridge in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia

Since Ukraine is one of the largest chicken exporters, particularly to the Gulf countries, we need to obtain halal certificates. It is the only document that allows us to supply food products to the Muslim world. Malaysia is one of the countries that issue those certificates. Kuala Lumpur has already granted the Ukrainian Halal Certification Centre the status of a foreign institution whose certificates are recognised in Malaysia. We have applied for the recognition of two more such institutions and expect a positive response in the near future.

Unfortunately, Malaysia is similarly cooperating with Russia, which is avidly utilising its Muslim factor. For example, it holds forums on Islamic banking and halal products in Tatarstan. We are direct competitors with Russia, which is active on this track, and what it is doing to the grain corridor and has done to the Kakhovka hydroelectric dam is not least the direct elimination of a competitor in the agricultural market.

What could we get from the Malaysians? To begin with, they have significant financial resources, and thus they could become investors in the early stages of Ukraine's recovery. Unfortunately, the Malaysians were not invited to London. That was the British side's decision, probably made after some consultations.

Malaysia is also a major exporter of hydrocarbons (in particular, liquefied natural gas). In this regard, we have a common interest with the Europeans. Most likely, it will not be about bilateral contracts between Malaysia and Ukraine but about our accumulation of energy resources for the EU. The fact is that we have the largest underground gas storage facilities in Europe, and the EU, according





Архівне фото. Святкування Різдва та Дня святого Миколая, 2019 рік

File photo. Christmas and St Nicholas Day celebrations, 2019

to its geographical guidelines, must have at least three independent suppliers of liquefied natural gas. It is currently considering Malaysia as one of them. If the relevant agreements are concluded, then by around 2025, Ukrainian gas storage facilities will have been able to accumulate liquefied gas, which would be purchased at a lower price and then transported to Europe at a higher price in winter. We are working on this. It would also be good to strengthen cooperation in the defence sector. We have been working on this since the 2000s, but unfortunately, due to political considerations, Malaysia has been avoiding such interactions.

– *There are many Malaysian students in Ukraine, and they mostly choose the healthcare sector. Does the Embassy work with Malaysian youth and students? What are the attitudes towards Ukraine within that age group?*

– To start with, sadly, there only used to be many. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Malaysian students left Ukrainian higher education institutions. I hope we can restore the positive trend – and not only in the once popular medical study programmes but also in engineering, for instance. That is why we are developing partnerships between polytechnics.

Malaysians usually choose US or UK institutions, but they are interested in cheaper higher education. It is important for them that the course is taught in English, and some of our universities (for example, Ihor Sikorskyi Kyiv Polytechnic Institute) have already introduced this option.

The attitudes among the Malaysians who have graduated from Ukrainian higher education institutions are, of course, pro-Ukrainian. However, their number is still relatively small, and they are predominantly Indian. Malaysia

is, in fact, a racially segregated society. The legislation enshrines the privileged status of the Malays, so the other two main groups – the Chinese and the Indians – are oppressed. The Malays are entitled to privileges, and they defend them quite firmly. The separation is as follows: the Malays run civil service and most agriculture; the Indians – professional activities (including medical); the Chinese – commercial services and business.

The religious factor is also quite important: there is a significant predominance of Islam, and religious Sharia courts operate alongside secular state courts, although this is neither enshrined in the Constitution nor in the laws. The struggle for the younger generation is being waged on the basis of religion, and the Islamic factor is only getting stronger. There are two main centres of influence from the Islamic world: Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. Of course, if the Turkish type of Islam gained popularity, it would be better because that country is more secular and more focused on progress and development. However, there is no guarantee that this will happen. The Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) tripled the number of elected representatives after the last election. They are not yet able to form a government on their own, but their influence is growing.

*– Malaysia is one of the founding states of the ASEAN. Recently, Kyiv's relations with the Association have been improving in light of Ukraine's increased interaction with the Global South. In particular, in November 2022, a delegation led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, represented Ukraine at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia. In your opinion, what measures can be taken to develop our relations with the Organisation?*



Зустріч з українськими паралімпійцями-бадмінтоністами, 2023 рік

Meeting with Ukrainian Paralympic badminton athletes, 2023



Благодійний ярмарок до Дня франкофонії, березень 2023 рік

Charity fair on the occasion of the Francophonie Day, March 2023

– During the visit of Mr Kuleba, we signed a document on Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. And that is only the first step – our final goal is to become an ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly associate member.

ASEAN is a consensus-based organisation that focuses primarily on economic development. Therefore, we should build our cooperation on specific economic projects. For example, by launching such a project with a single country, we can bring it under the general framework of ASEAN and gain support from other members. This is important for Ukraine, and our entry points should be Indonesia, as a country with an immense market, and the Philippines, as a culturally close country.

Next year, when Timor-Leste becomes a full-fledged member of ASEAN, I think the country may also become an entry point since it is a recipient of aid. It is a country neither large nor rich, so they would welcome any Ukrainian proposals.

– *In conclusion, would you like to wish something to the Ukrainian communities and your colleagues?*

– As our great genius said: ‘Keep fighting – you are sure to win!’