

Ukraine: Interview of the High Representative/Vice-President Jos



With their permission, a translation of the original interview (in [Ukrainian](#) and [Russian](#)) can be found below. Any subsequent reporting using quotes from the interview should refer to the original source – Novoe Vremya.

How does the European Union feel about Ukraine's European aspirations now, in 2020, after coronavirus crisis has shown how important is to have a Europe-wide response to both – economic and healthcare challenges?

The European Union acknowledges Ukraine's European aspirations and welcomes its European choice. The Association Agreement has committed us to economic integration and political association regardless of circumstances.

Our close association is naturally encompassing the current challenges. The EU has put forward unprecedented support to Ukraine to fight the COVID-19 pandemic: €190 million is the largest financial assistance package for any of our Eastern partners, and we also have an emergency €1.2 billion macro-financial assistance package. COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge for the healthcare systems and economies of both our EU Member States and Ukraine.

We will keep strengthening our preparedness and response capacities, of sharing information and improving the international response, including through relevant international organisations such as the WHO. We are ready to cooperate on the future COVID-19 vaccine, for it to become a global, affordable common good.

More widely, it is global solidarity, and effective multilateralism, that are required more than ever.

When do you think that Ukraine and the EU will again enjoy unrestricted air

travel? What is the timing and what are conditions for that?

I understand this is an important question for many Ukrainians, who can travel visa free to the EU as one of the benefits of our political association and economic integration, just as it is an important question for many EU citizens, who would like to plan some well-deserved holidays or visit family members living in other countries.

This will depend, however, on a number of things including decisions by individual EU Member States, as well as the eventual lifting of travel restrictions imposed by the Ukrainian Government, which we understand are intended to protect Ukrainian citizens.

The gradual lifting or reintroduction of the restriction on non-essential travel towards and from a third country at the external borders of the Union is the responsibility of the Member States. We have applied a careful approach, strictly based on the epidemiological data that is available. We expect that once the epidemiological situation allows it, the situation will be assessed again and the decisions adapted accordingly.

Approximately two million Ukrainians work and live in the EU, mostly in Poland, Italy and the Czech Republic. Is the EU interested in attracting more Ukrainian migrants?

Ukrainian workers and migrants make a big contribution to labour markets around the world, first and foremost to those of the EU.

Ukrainian citizens represent the largest groups of foreign citizens receiving long-term visas and work permits from many of our Member States, including Poland for example, which is the number one destination these days for Ukrainian migrant workers. In 2018, Member States granted almost 490,000 first residence permits to Ukrainian nationals in 2018. At the end of 2018, Ukrainian nationals held 1.18 million valid residence permits in the EU. Many Ukrainians also work on seasonal and short-term contracts abroad, which means the numbers of Ukrainians working in the EU is constantly changing but most estimates point to several million Ukrainians working abroad.

One of the main objectives of the EU's comprehensive approach to migration management is to promote legal migration and to attract talent into the EU, matching the people and their skills with the labour market needs, benefitting both the EU and the countries of origin. Legal migration and mobility with key third countries, including the Eastern Partnership countries, could be an avenue of cooperation to be further explored. At the same time, it is important to recall that it is the responsibility of the EU Member States to determine from which third countries they would like to attract labour migrants.

Do you think that the association and free trade agreement between EU and Ukraine needs an update, specifically, in terms of trade restrictions?

Our Association Agreement, which entered into force just over three years ago, on 1 September 2017, is the most comprehensive and ambitious agreement

the EU has ever signed with another country. The Agreement is the contractual basis for EU-Ukraine relations and all of our intense cooperation. It will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Firstly, implementation is now the priority. There is plenty of work to be done to fully reap the benefits of the agreement and we should work together within the framework of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Within this framework, we are ready to explore deeper sectoral cooperation for example in the digital area and also ways to further facilitate trade.

Secondly, the Agreement is a 'living' document that includes provisions for the parties to update it, notably the annexes, with all relevant EU legislative acts, with which Ukraine has agreed to approximate its own legislation. For instance, we have updated its annexes on energy, public procurement, and are working on updating the annexes on environment, services, climate and customs. This is key to ensure that the commitments undertaken remain up to date and fit for purpose.

One of the main aims of Agreement is to enhance our economic and trade relations. The evolution of trade over the past years shows a tremendous increase of 65% in trade in goods, which demonstrates the positive impact of the Agreement for Ukrainian exporters and consumers alike. We have also seen an increase in the number of Ukrainian companies (14,500 in 2019 vs. 11,700 in 2015) exporting to the EU and a greater variety of exports. We expect these positive trends to continue as Ukraine implements the Agreement and approximates its legislation. This will contribute to bringing Ukraine and the EU closer together.

How do you see the pace of Ukrainian reforms at this point? What are the most crucial parts of Ukraine's reforms?

Since 2014, Ukraine has made major reform progress. This includes working towards economic stabilisation and further strengthening the rule of law. With the new government since September 2019, we have seen many important legislative initiatives. We have welcomed the recent opening of the land market in Ukraine, as well as the banking resolution law, which paved the way for the new programme of the International Monetary Fund. Let's also not forget that all these reforms are taking place in the context of the ongoing foreign aggression that Ukraine is facing in its east, as well as continued illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol.

I want to underline that the EU has mobilised unprecedented support to Ukraine. Since 2014, the EU and the European Financial Institutions have mobilised more than €15 billion to support the reform process. This support certainly comes with conditions. Recently, as I was saying, the EU has approved additional macro-financial assistance loans of €1.2 billion to Ukraine to help limit the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Maintaining macro-economic stability and central bank independence, as well as continuing cooperation with the IMF is of utmost importance for Ukraine.

The rule of law is key for Ukraine's overall reform efforts to succeed.

Maintaining and continuing the success of reforms, including the independence of judiciary, anti-corruption and law-enforcement agencies, is crucial. The much needed prosecution of the authors of the \$5 billion Privat Bank fraud should be completed. I would also like to underline that the role of civil society and independent media are vital in any democracy, as they contribute to decision-making, scrutiny, and public debate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added a significant factor of instability, affecting the healthcare system and the socioeconomic situation throughout the country, as well as increasing disinformation. We have demonstrated our solidarity with Ukraine mobilising €190 million as I mentioned earlier.

The EU remains Ukraine's strongest and most reliable partner. Our aim continues to be to benefit our citizens and businesses. We want to further our political association and economic integration by making full use of our Association Agreement and bringing Ukraine closer to the EU.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is currently losing his popular support, while anti-Western sentiments gain ground in Ukraine. How does the EU respond to these kinds of challenges – when you can't do the right thing because they're not popular?

Through the Revolution of Dignity six years ago, the citizens of Ukraine called for change, for more transparency, more honesty and no more corruption. Since then, Ukraine has made unprecedented progress in reforming the country. However, the path to reform continues to be challenging. It is a marathon, not a sprint, and I can understand that there may be fatigue. Comprehensive and irreversible reforms require consistent and long-term efforts. At times, the reform course may require difficult decisions, some of which may be unpopular in the short term. Despite the difficulties, it is important not to lose sight of the overarching goal, which is building a safe, prosperous and resilient Ukraine. Our role as the EU is to offer our full support to these reforms and to all those who are determined to take Ukraine's reform process forward, for the benefit of its citizens.

Does the EU have a specific policy on China and Chinese investments?

Ukrainian assets attract some Chinese interest, but the U.S., an ally of Ukraine, usually recommends to stay away from too deep cooperation with China. The relationship between the European Union and China is simultaneously one of the most strategically important and one of the most challenging that we have. China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. As with any relationship that the European Union has with countries around the world, we defend and promote our interests and values. We need to be aware that the value of our bilateral trade, for example, stands at €1.5 billion a day on average, and that as the emitter of 28.5% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, the EU – which accounts for 8% – cannot hope to make an impact on climate change if we do not encourage China to work with us. At the same

time, we have many concerns, for example related to reciprocity, market access for EU companies, and the level playing field. We also clearly disagree when it comes to China's imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, and its approach to human rights and fundamental freedoms more broadly, whether in Xinjiang or elsewhere. These, in addition to China's selective approach to multilateralism and our concerns over cybersecurity, disinformation and censorship are all areas that we discuss with China at the highest level and on which we seek to make progress. We are also well aware of China's State-driven investment strategy, not only within the EU, but around the world. For the EU, again, it is vital that such investments in the EU comply with our rules and regulations, and that they do not damage EU interests and interests. For this reason, we are improving our investment screening process and looking more closely at the consequences of foreign subsidies on competition and the level playing field in the EU internal market. We would encourage our partners around the world to also ensure that any foreign investment is sustainable, based on market rules, is transparent and meets international norms. This is what the EU aims for in its own investments, including in Ukraine, and it has delivered very positive benefits for our respective citizens.

For the past six years, Ukrainian diplomats have been telling a story of Ukraine being a victim of Russian aggression. Now it looks like the Ukrainian government is finally ready for peace with Russia. How do you feel about this?

Ukraine has taken important steps under President Zelenskyy's leadership. This has lead also to renewed dynamics in the Normandy talks. We now expect the same constructive approach from Russia.

Since the entry into force on 27 July of the additional measures to strengthen the ceasefire agreed on 22 July, the security situation in eastern Ukraine has visibly improved. There was over a month of no civilian casualties due to shelling or small-arms fire. We are, therefore, concerned by the recent incidents that have resulted in casualties among Ukrainian military personnel and by hearing threats made by the representatives of the Russia-backed armed formations to restart the shelling.

The comprehensive and unlimited ceasefire must be endorsed by all actors. This is a vital precondition for any sustainable political settlement of the conflict, which can only be reached through the full implementation of the Minsk agreements.

In this context, we appreciate the restraint and the course of action taken by Ukraine. At the same time we continue to call on Russia to reciprocate the determination and openness of Ukraine in the Minsk process and for Russia to fulfil its commitments under the Minsk agreements.

Do you think that Ukrainian diplomacy now needs a new foreign policy narrative and what could this be like?

Ukraine is a sovereign and independent country and perfectly capable of defining its own foreign policy priorities. As the European Union, we do not

force our partners to choose between one relationship and the other. We stand as a reliable partner, a strong defender of the rules-based order, mutually beneficial cooperation and effective multilateralism, which are all the more needed in these current times of great common challenges. Ukraine can count on the EU to remain its strongest, most transparent and most reliable partner.

What are the red lines that Ukraine shouldn't cross during the Donbas peace process from the point of view of EU diplomacy?

Of course, it is not up to me or the EU to set up Ukraine's red lines on any issue. In general the red lines are marked by the principles of international law. Specifically on eastern Ukraine – the priority now is for Russia to reciprocate the positive steps taken by President Zelenskyy. Allow me to reiterate that the EU continues to be unwavering in our support to Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, including Crimea. The economic sanctions on Russia are linked to the full implementation of the Minsk agreements and this also remains a clear condition for any substantial change in EU-Russia relations.

How do you see the future of Nord Stream 2, given latest development with Alexei Navalny, a Putin critic who was poisoned in Russia?

The attempted assassination of Alexei Navalny using a military chemical nerve agent is completely unacceptable. The findings are conclusive and have been corroborated by labs in Sweden and France, as well as Germany. We expect Russia to investigate the crime thoroughly and in full transparency and to bring those responsible to justice. We also expect the Russian authorities to fully cooperate with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to ensure an impartial investigation. As the European Union, we are following closely the Russian authorities' response to the findings, and based on that, will see how the international community should respond. Whether or not to proceed with Nord Stream 2 is a decision for the individual countries involved.

Tell us about potential EU sanctions against the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus. What could they look like?

I am confident that EU will soon sanction those responsible for the violence, repression of peaceful protest and the falsification of the election results. We hope that this will have the effect of, on the one hand, stopping violence and repression from continuing, and on the other, encouraging the Belarusian authorities to engage in an inclusive national dialogue with broader society, in particular the Coordination Council. This would hopefully lead to a peaceful solution that responds positively to the demands of the Belarusian people. Let me reiterate that sanctions – while a useful tool – are only one element of our approach to supporting a dialogue in Belarus. As the European Union, we are in constant contact with the Belarusian authorities, representatives of the Coordination Council and Belarusian civil society, as well as our international partners, in order to encourage progress. If things do not improve, we always have the option of taking further measures. The

European Union stands by the Belarusian people in their struggle for democracy and fundamental rights. And we also support the sovereignty and independence of Belarus. It is our deep conviction that a solution to current crisis should be found by Belarusian people, with no outside interference. The EU is ready to facilitate and support the efforts to establish an inclusive dialogue between the authorities and civil society. And last but not the least, I wish to underline that violence and repression against peaceful protesters is unacceptable and should stop. Belarus is a European country and it should behave as such. Respect of fundamental rights of its own citizens is a shared European value, and we hope Belarusian people will be able to enjoy those rights. This is exactly the rationale behind the EU sanctions which will be targeted against those who took part in electoral fraud and repressions against the peaceful protesters. Our aim is not to “punish” Belarus, but rather take action that would allow Belarus to become a place where such things do not happen.

Where do you see the EU five years from now? What kind of economy will the EU have? Who are going to be the new member-countries? What will happen to European security during this time?

Where the EU will be in five years' time depends almost entirely on the decisions we take now. We are at, it is fair to say, a crossroads. We have to decide what we want to be: a player or the playground. We have taken some important decisions during this coronavirus crisis – to accelerate our transition to a green, modern and sustainable economy; to invest in the socio-economic recovery with ambition; and we have taken a stance – true to our interests and values – in supporting democracy, human rights, the rule of law, free and open trade, and effective multilateralism. There is always more to be done, of course. Looking at our immediate neighbourhood, from Belarus to Ukraine, from the Eastern Mediterranean to Libya, we can see that the EU still needs to have a more effective foreign and united policy. But we have demonstrated that the European Union is not merely a pawn in a chess game between two superpowers – the United States and China – but has autonomy, a strategic vision of its own, and leadership capabilities in its own right. It is not possible to make concrete predictions as to what the future holds, but one thing is certain, it will require unity within the European Union if we are to be able to wield our weight successfully beyond our borders.