

The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the Dutch Referendum

It gives me great pleasure to address you today on a very important issue that could define in a marked way the course of modern history, namely the Referendum on the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement*.

I am well aware that this referendum is for the citizens of the Netherlands, and I respect your right to vote without any undue outside influence. I also strongly believe, as I am sure that you do as well, that choices are best made when individuals have access to as much information as possible and can participate in open dialogue. That is why I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you today and I look forward to our exchange of ideas.

I am a Canadian of Ukrainian descent whose parents emigrated to Canada after the Second World War, fleeing two oppressive regimes in search of a better life in a country where every individual is respected, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, education or social status; where fundamental rights and freedoms are the norm as opposed to the exception. I consider myself very fortunate to have been raised in Canada, to have enjoyed the opportunity to pursue my goals and ambitions there, and to know that my children and grandchildren will have the same opportunities. The most significant opportunity that has shaped who I am today, and why I stand before you today, was the opportunity afforded to me by Canada to develop and maintain my Ukrainian cultural identity in a very public way.

Your country has also warmly welcomed many Ukrainians throughout the years who have made the Netherlands their home, and who have contributed in many ways to the growth and prosperity of this country. For instance, a very talented musicologist and choir conductor, Myroslaw Antonowycz, was forced to flee Ukraine during the Second World War and settled in the Netherlands. In 1951, he founded the Utrecht Byzantine Choir (also known as the Lysenko Choir). What makes this choir unique is that the Utrecht Byzantine Choir sings church and folk-inspired classical music in impeccable Ukrainian and it is composed almost entirely of Dutch singers.

My first introduction to this beautiful choir was in my home town of Montreal when I was still living at home with my parents and my father organized a concert for this choir during its cross-Canada tour. Later, in 2010, when I travelled to The Hague to meet with then OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Knut Vollebaek, I had the opportunity to hear the Byzantine Choir at the St. Nicholas Basilica in IJsselstein, province of Utrecht. This choir was then conducted by another Ukrainian who made the Netherlands her home, Irina Gorvanko. For their important contribution to music and multiculturalism, the Utrecht Byzantine Choir and its tenor, Paul Hakkenes, were recipients in 2008 of the highest honor of the Ukrainian World Congress, namely the St. Volodymyr medal.

The Ukrainian community in the Netherlands numbers over 7,000, has a vibrant community life, and actively contributes to this country's development.

I address you today as President of the Ukrainian World Congress (or the UWC) – the international coordinating body representing the interests of over 20 million people with Ukrainian origins living outside of Ukraine, including the Netherlands. The UWC coordinates a network of member and community organizations in 49 countries in the world.

The UWC is a totally independent body and does not receive any funding from Ukraine's government nor from any other government in the world. In 2003 the UWC was recognized by the United Nations Economic and Social Council as a non-governmental organization with special consultative status. I am a volunteer and do not receive any form of remuneration for my work as UWC President.

The UWC has focused on such important matters as the protection and defence of human and national minority rights and combatting human trafficking; the promotion of democratic reforms in Ukraine; the monitoring of Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ukraine, as well as issues that define Ukrainian community life, including initiatives in education, social services, culture and sport.

Over the past year, the UWC has actively supported the Ukrainian people in their struggle to protect Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity, and provided substantial humanitarian aid, including for the victims of violence who are on the front lines in Eastern Ukraine to whom we provide standardized improved first aid kits with appropriate training on how to use them. Our humanitarian initiative Patriot Defence has improved tactical medicine in Ukraine, developing a formal educational program based on NATO standards.

The UWC also contributes to the dissemination of accurate information on the situation in Ukraine.

Over the last years, the UWC has actively promoted the signing and ratification of the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* as a huge step in Ukraine's democratic development and golden opportunity for all EU member states. This agreement was ultimately signed on 27 June 2014 and ratified by all 28 EU member states, including the Netherlands.

What is the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* all about?

The EU has Association Agreements with more than 25 states and regions in the world, including Georgia, Israel, Lebanon, Moldova, as well as Central America and South American countries.

The main purpose of such agreements is to strengthen trade and economic cooperation.

The *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* (or the Association Agreement) is an instrument which reflects the strategic importance of EU-Ukraine relations. It is very comprehensive covering all areas of interest, contains rules-based provisions and cooperation arrangements, and provides for both political association and economic integration.

This Association Agreement also includes a *Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area* (or the DCFTA).

With all of its key elements, this Association Agreement builds a long-term foundation for EU-Ukraine relations without prejudging on any possible EU membership for Ukraine in the future.

This Association Agreement focuses on support for core reforms, economic recovery and growth, governance and sector co-operation in such areas as energy, transport, environmental protection, industrial and small and medium enterprise cooperation, social development and protection, equal rights, consumer protection, education, training and youth, as well as cultural cooperation.

The foundation of this Association Agreement is the reinforcement of common values, notably democracy and rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, a market economy and sustainable development.

This Association Agreement will enhance cooperation in foreign and security policy, with a focus on regional issues, weapons of mass destruction, non-proliferation and disarmament, conflict prevention, and crisis management.

The DCFTA, which is the core of this Association Agreement, goes much further than classic free trade areas, and provides for two specific areas of commitment:

- 1) The EU and Ukraine commit to move progressively towards duty free trade. Such trade liberalization is at the core of all the free trade agreements the EU has signed with numerous countries all over the world, and is based on empirical evidence that opening up markets is a win-win process, leading to more trade, more jobs, and lower prices; and
- 2) Ukraine commits to adopt a number of EU norms and standards on foods, industrial and consumer goods, as well as EU rules on services, competition, public procurement and intellectual property. Trade between the EU and Ukraine will become easier. This implies no changes to EU regulations, only to the Ukrainian legislation. Ukraine will be obliged to adopt EU rules and standards.

Justice, freedom and security will be protected with measures addressing the rule of law, data protection, migration, the fight against money laundering and financing of terrorism, illicit drugs, the fight against organized crime, and counter-terrorism.

Energy is addressed in this Association Agreement with particular focus on issues concerning security of supply, the gradual integration of energy markets, energy efficiency, renewable energy sources and nuclear safety.

Generally, this Association Agreement will serve to enhance cooperation in some 28 key sector policy areas, with the goal of bringing them in line with EU laws and where relevant, international norms and standards.

Association agreements are usually applied provisionally before they are ratified, so that all the partners can immediately reap the benefits of free trade.

The *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* has been provisionally applied since November 2014 and the DCFTA component came into effect on 1 January 2016.

The provisional application of this Association Agreement has already significantly impacted Ukraine which has begun its journey along a very challenging, but rewarding, path of reform.

It is needless to say that corruption, rooted in over half a century of Soviet subjugation, is the issue that requires the most attention. Fortunately, a genuine anti-corruption strategy has been developed and is in the process of being implemented.

Among the most significant initiatives was the establishment of a National Anti-Corruption Bureau, the membership of which was elected through a transparent competition with the participation of international organizations. Currently under investigation are 80 cases of corruption by a range of individuals and institutions, including civil servants, directors of public companies, members of the State Prosecutor's office, and educational institutions.

A Special Anti-Corruption Division was created in the Office of the State Prosecutor with the specific mandate of investigating allegations of corruption. This division is currently investigating 20 allegations against members of Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers.

Last month the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption came into effect with a mandate of overseeing and implementing national anti-corruption policies. It is currently developing an electronic registry for the public disclosure of assets by civil servants. It will also be responsible for overseeing political party financing.

Other highlights include public access to state property registers. In fact, over 300 registers and databases are in the process of opening.

An e-data resource was launched to ensure full transparency of all government spending and e-services for the citizens were introduced with over 20% of the documents currently available online.

In fact, during the one-year period beginning December 2014 through December 2015, Ukraine has either adopted or drafted new laws and developed reform strategies in just under 50 specific areas of national interest.

Allow me to highlight only a few of these areas and the critical steps taken forward:

On enhancing security:

- A new police force was established and by spring of 2016 new patrol brigades will patrol the streets of twenty-nine (29) Ukrainian cities and towns;
- Ukrainian citizens will now be able to obtain a passport with a contactless electronic chip for travel abroad;
- The civil service will now be regulated by a new law which envisages its de-politicization, efficiency and independence. The law also provides for the establishment of a Fund to increase salaries for civil servants; and
- An e-data resource was launched to ensure full transparency of all government spending.

On economic policy:

- The number of taxes and fees were cut from 22 to 11;
- The number of regulating bodies was reduced from 56 to 28;
- The number of permits for doing business was reduced from 143 to 84, and the number of required licences - from 56 to 30;
- Compulsory certificates for 13 products were abolished;
- The Law 'On Ensuring Transparent Activity of the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine' was adopted;
- Electronic VAT administration was introduced; and
- The first stage of deregulation and simplification of procedures for cargo registration in seaports was completed.

On the management of state assets:

- For the first time, financial statements of the 100 largest state-owned enterprises were prepared and a financial audit was mandated;
- A competitive selection of 277 heads of state-owned enterprises was implemented;
- A list of state-owned property of strategic importance to the economy and security was approved;
- A list of 345 companies subjected to privatization was passed.

On food policy:

- Food markets were diversified to overcome the effects caused by the Russian embargo;
- The share of products exported to the Russian market decreased to 2%;
- The markets of 9 countries were opened for the dairy and meat industries;
- 238 enterprises got permissions to supply products to the EU markets within the year; and
- The first stage of deregulation in the agricultural sector took place: 14 certificates and 6 licenses were cancelled, and more than 50 amendments to the legislation have been made.

On energy independence:

- The energy security of Ukraine has been strengthened and the supply routes were significantly diversified;
- A Plan of measures to reform the gas sector, as agreed with the World Bank and the Energy Community, was approved;
- The gas supply from Europe was increased by 2.5 times and the gas supply from the Russian Federation was reduced by 53%; and
- Natural gas consumption was reduced by 20.4%.

On social policy:

- Pensions, salaries and social payments to citizens are paid up;
- Privileges and special pensions to Ministers, MPs and other officials were revoked;
- The living wage was increased by 13.1%; and
- A Law 'On External Labour Migration' was passed, which for the first time protects at the state level the social rights of labour migrants and their family members.

On education and science:

- The Parliament passed a Government bill 'On Scientific and Scientific-Technical Activities', which modifies the process of scientific research.
- The Horizon 2020 Agreement with the EU has been signed and ratified. This is the biggest EU Research and Innovation program ever with nearly 80 billion Euros of funding available over 7 years, in addition to the private investment that this money will attract.

On youth and sport:

- The Ministry of Youth and Sports and state-owned enterprises subordinated to it switched to e-procurement, an initiative that will save about UAH 6 million.

On cultural policy:

- A long-term strategy in support of Ukrainian culture was developed;
- Ukraine joined the EU Creative Europe program opening up additional opportunities for cooperation between Ukrainian and European artists; and
- For the first time in Ukraine, expenditures related to the protection of museums, libraries and nature reserves became a secured item in the national budget.

On international aid:

- An agreement on a four-year \$17.5 billion US cooperation program with the IMF was concluded;
- Additional international support in the amount of \$7.2 billion US from official and multilateral partners was obtained;
- The restructuring of public and publicly guaranteed debt was completed; and
- The implementation of a joint international technical assistance project titled ‘Financial development of NGOs’ was launched with the US Agency for International Development, totalling \$2.09 million US.

Finally, on the government’s performance:

- Ukraine rose by 29 points in the Doing Business ranking relative to 2014, and in the area of business registration by 40 points;
- The World Bank forecasts the growth of Ukraine’s GDP in 2016 by 1%, in 2017 – by 2%, and in 2018 – by 3%;
- According to the Global Competitiveness Index of the World Economic Forum, Ukraine improved in the following two categories: government’s efficiency rose by 11 points as compared to 2014; and the transparency of public policy rose by 32 points as compared to 2013; and
- The Global Open Data Index ranks Ukraine 58th for public data openness among 134 countries.

Reforms may not be moving as quickly as some may hope, but they are clearly and irreversibly moving forward.

This Association Agreement is ensuring that Europe moves slowly toward Ukraine, that Europe embraces Ukraine, and that Europe assists Ukraine in implementing comprehensive reforms.

This Association Agreement, with its provisions, will above all, strengthen the rule of law in Ukraine, strengthen its democracy, and strengthen the protection of human rights.

What is the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* not about?

This Association Agreement is not about Ukraine’s membership in the European Union. There is not a single provision in this Association Agreement that refers to EU membership, nor has there been any commitment to Ukraine from the EU to that effect.

This Association Agreement is not about providing financial support to Ukraine. The EU has been providing support to Ukraine for a long time as part of its cooperation and development aid, but this is not linked to this Association Agreement and there is no new commitment to greater financial support from the EU to Ukraine in this Association Agreement.

The Association Agreement is not about opening the EU to Ukrainian labourers nor migrants. There is no provision giving enhanced freedom of movement to Ukrainian citizens into or inside the EU. On this point, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that despite the foreign aggression in Eastern Ukraine which has forced over 1.5 million Ukrainians to flee their homes, these displaced Ukrainians have not been flowing across the borders to seek refuge in Europe. To the contrary, many have already returned to their homes, while others have resettled in other regions of Ukraine with the help of fellow Ukrainians until they, too, are able to safely return home.

Finally, this Association Agreement is not about Ukraine joining NATO and includes no such provisions.

What are the benefits of the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* for the Netherlands?

The Netherlands will have open access to Ukraine's market of 45 million consumers and this market will be much more familiar for the Dutch as Ukraine commits in this Association Agreement to adopt EU norms and standards.

Once Ukraine aligns its business laws, regulations and procedures with European standards, trade with Ukraine for Dutch companies will essentially be the same as trading with any other EU member state. Businesses wanting to trade with Ukraine will no longer need to consider what rules they have to comply with, how those rules differ from those of the EU, or how they can obtain certification from either EU or Ukrainian authorities. This standardization will secure an equal playing field for all concerned.

At the beginning of 2016, the Netherlands was the second largest investor in the economy of Ukraine and among the top three investor countries since 2013. As of 1 January 2016, investors from the Netherlands had invested \$ 5.6 billion US or 12.9% of Ukraine's foreign investment. These Dutch investments will be better protected by new competition rules that Ukraine will implement in accordance with this Association Agreement.

Companies from the Netherlands already have a significant business presence in Ukraine. About 320 Dutch companies are working in Ukraine, half of which are engaged in agriculture and food production, while the rest are working in financial services, logistics, business and IT services, as well as energy, construction and the wood industry.

The DCFTA between the EU and Ukraine will only contribute to an increase in trade and business by Dutch companies in Ukraine.

This Association Agreement will simplify trade with the gradual liquidation of most customs tariffs between the EU and Ukraine, contributing to the continued lowering of expenses in conducting trade and a general increase in the volume of trade. Indeed:

- On the annual exports of about 775 million Euros from the Netherlands to Ukraine, the average import duties decrease from 5.7% to 2.9%.
- Moreover, the percentage of these exports that enter Ukraine free of any duty immediately increases from 53% to 72%, and, in ten years, that percentage will grow even higher to 98%.
- In addition, in ten years, the percentage of the annual imports of about 725 million Euros that enter the Netherlands from Ukraine free of any duty will increase from 43% to 78%.

It is worth noting, that the Netherlands will have a greater protection of tariffs on protected goods, including cocoa and chocolate since, by 2026, only 78% of Ukrainian goods will enter the Netherlands free of any duty, as opposed to 98% for Dutch goods entering Ukraine.

According to a research commissioned by your Ministry of Economical Affairs, with this Association Agreement:

- The Dutch livestock industry and bio-energy sector could benefit from Ukraine's supply of such raw materials as cereal, feed grain and oil seed.

- Dutch export opportunities increase in traditional areas such as dairy, potatoes, and horticultural products, as well as input supplies and services, including knowledge transfers.

There are already many success stories of business people from the Netherlands working and prospering in Ukraine.

Allow me to share a few that reveal not only the motivation of these individuals and attraction to work in Ukraine, but their faith in the future of Ukraine.

I am quoting excerpts from interviews conducted in Ukraine by the broadcaster *Ukraine Today* in cooperation with *Euromaidan Press*.

Mr. Nard Elsman, General Director of the Doing Dutch Business in Ukraine project, stated:

Ukraine and the Netherlands are very connected, especially if you look at the agriculture sphere. [...] the Netherlands are very innovative all over the world [and] Ukraine is the largest economical agricultural country in Europe itself. There is a lot of innovation here [...]

The young entrepreneurs [in Ukraine] are very aggressive, very eager to learn. [...] They have only one problem: they don't know where to start, they don't know where to go to and they don't have money. That's a problem. So if you give them the direction, you give them the tools, and they are professional, money will follow as well. But you have to do it step by step.

Mr. Dirck Smits Van Oyen is the managing director of ProMarketing, a company that grows grains and oil seeds, and imports equipment for the food processing industry. He stated:

Ukraine is one of the biggest countries in Europe, it's the size of France with 45 million inhabitants, it's bordering the European Union. It's a country which suffered from stagnation due to Soviet history, which means there's a huge opportunity for development and investment in practically every area you can imagine. Every area needs modernization, whether it's agriculture, machine building, or IT. There are lots of opportunities for cooperation between the Netherlands and Ukraine.

Ukraine is a country with a tremendous agricultural potential. The agricultural area is the size of 25% of the agricultural area of the entire EU. So it's a huge food producer and that offers lots of opportunities for Dutch companies who are very good at producing machines and technology for the agricultural and food processing sector. If you imagine that Ukraine today has about 5% of all the storage capacity that it needs for all these vegetables, and a lot goes to waste.

It's about taking away barriers for both sides to do business with each other. And there can be very little objection against taking away barriers, bringing them to the European and Dutch level, which is very beneficial for everybody in this region, the EU, and Ukraine.

I'm extremely optimistic about Ukraine. I've seen the strength of civil society and the desire to change the country for the better. This desire was strong enough to break the resistance that existed in political elites and perhaps still exists, in some political elites. And that will drive change. Young people, civil society will drive change and make Ukraine a real European country. I'm proud to be here as a Dutch businessman.

Mr. Arno Klijbroek is the founder and owner of ATM Trade management, providing legal and practical support to foreign investors in the Ukrainian market since 2000. Here's what he had to say:

From the end of last year we again see an influx in our business of new clients that wanted to start new business here or extend existing business. The mood is definitely more positive and of course the Association Agreement is the major motor in that doing business really does become easier. Also already simpler for Dutch exporters, it will be, it is already – cheaper, easier to get the products in, which everybody of course is hopeful will help in developing the export of Dutch products to Ukraine.

Mr. Mikel Honders is the Commercial Director of Galicia Greenery, an agricultural company that grows produce year round in greenhouses. His comments:

For us it's important with the Association Agreement that we can do transparent business, which is the same rules for everybody.

We are a trading country. [...] So this country has a huge potential in people that are demanding fresh products. The biggest advantage for the Netherlands is trading. Easy and transparent trading. Also, the labour force here, if you see what is going on here on the IT level, it's much higher than everywhere else. It's not without a reason that so many Dutch companies start their IT business here. Nestle is outsourcing. People from all over the world are here with IT. There are educated people, this country has a huge future for that. As a trading country, how can we refuse such a huge market?

[...] it's the road Ukraine chose to go, the European way. For me, it's another step to accomplish this. To get European norms in this country is the way of doing business. What you see with the new police, I have already seen that things are changing on a touchable level. [...] it's important to see things really changing on the streets. [...] They are really doing their best to weed out corruption. And of course they are not there yet, it's not like everything is good already. But for me the most important thing is that they made a decision in which direction to go.

These testimonials by Dutch businessmen indicate that Ukraine is indeed forging ahead with its democratization and with its plans to become more like your country, more like any European country.

This Association Agreement will ultimately contribute to securing a free, democratic, stable, peaceful and prospering Ukraine. In that sense, this Association Agreement is the EU's investment into democracy, security, stability and prosperity in a larger Europe.

What else does Ukraine offer today?

Ukraine is the largest country in Europe geographically and ranks no. 6 in Europe in terms of population. Ukraine has a rich history and culture and boasts 7 world heritage sites. Ukraine has a diverse population with over 130 nationalities.

Ukraine has a 99.7% literacy rate and the 4th most educated population in the world. Over 70% have a secondary or higher education.

Civil society has developed in answer to the needs of the population. In 2014, 63% of Ukrainians donated to the army, internally displaced persons, and to other societal needs.

Ukraine is a leader in global agro-export with 33% of the world's black-earth soil. It is the no. 1 exporter of sunflower oil and the no. 2 exporter globally of grains.

Ukraine is the no. 1 software engineering force in Central and Eastern Europe. 16,000 IT students graduate each year; over 100 global companies have software Research & Development facilities in Ukraine; IT outsourcing has grown 20 times over the past decade; and Ukraine is in the top-three by number of certified IT professionals.

Ukraine has a full scale aerospace industry with 5,000 aerospace graduates every year. The Mriya-225 is the largest cargo airplane ever built, transporting up to 250 tons of cargo.

The pharmaceutical industry has experienced 15% growth annually for the last 5 years.

E-commerce has grown five times over the last 5 years.

It now takes only 2 days to open a business in Ukraine.

Easily accessible, Ukraine is 2 truck days away from most European cities. 4 of 10 European transport corridors run through Ukraine which has 170,000 km of roadways and 22,000 km of railways.

The stakes in this referendum for the Netherlands, and all of Europe, are incredibly high.

You and your fellow citizens will decide whether the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement*, already ratified by all 28 EU member states, including the Netherlands, should remain as is or whether you wish your country to undo it.

A “No” vote would essentially mean that the majority of the Dutch people are turning their back to the Ukrainian people.

A “No” vote would signal to Ukraine that the Netherlands are not interested in everything Ukraine has to offer and lack confidence in its potential.

A “No” vote would call into question Europe's global image of a stable and well functioning geopolitical block.

A “No” vote would throw the future of the EU's Eastern Partnership into question, opening the door to Russian ambitions in this part of Europe while raising many European security concerns.

A “No” vote will bolster the forces from both within, as well as outside Ukraine, to push East, and Russia will seize this opportunity to continue pulling Ukraine into its sphere of influence – a goal Russia has never relinquished since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* was the catalyst for the EuroMaidan in Ukraine. In the cold winter months of 2013-14, thousands of protestors demonstrated daily on EuroMaidans throughout Ukraine. They demonstrated not for some social issue, not for an increase in salary, or higher pensions. They stood for an ideal, the right to live with dignity in a democratic European country. They indicated in no uncertain terms to Ukraine's authorities and the EU leadership that Ukrainians embrace Europe.

Numerous prominent Europeans appeared on the central EuroMaidan in Kyiv and publicly declared their support and solidarity with the Ukrainian people. This reinforced the strength, courage, determination and unwavering resolve of the Ukrainian people to move forward toward Europe and not backward toward a revamped Soviet Union, under the guise of a *Customs Union* or a *Eurasian Union*.

For that, the protestors were detained, kidnapped, humiliated, savagely beaten and even killed by snipers. Amazingly, they stood their ground and eventually brought down a highly corrupt and authoritarian regime that was actively backed by the Russian Federation.

EuroMaidan's ultimate victory was certainly a wonderful victory for the Ukrainian people; but it was also an important victory for Europe; and it was a remarkable victory for democracy.

Unfortunately, a well-deserved celebration by Ukrainians and Europeans alike of EuroMaidan's victory was short-lived because "*little green men*" invaded Crimea and then attacked Eastern Ukraine.

Russia did not just send "*little green men*" into Ukraine. Russia launched a hybrid war against Ukraine that includes a well-financed disinformation campaign aimed at convincing Europe, including the Dutch, that Ukraine is a failed state.

The dramatic consequences of Russia's aggression against Eastern Ukraine are as follows: over 9,000 people killed, 20,000 people wounded and 1.5 million people, including almost 200,000 children, internally displaced, as well as 30,000 hectares of Ukraine's land contaminated by Russian landmines.

Incredibly, these tremendous losses and sacrifices have only made the Ukrainian people stronger in their resolve to continue on the European path, free of Russian influence.

Over recent months, there have been many appeals from Ukrainians to the Dutch people with respect to the upcoming referendum; appeals for a chance to realize their choice.

26 national minorities in Ukraine wrote the following:

Currently, Ukraine is experiencing one of the most dramatic moments in its history. The Ukrainian nation, composed of many ethnic and religious groups, has made its civilizational choice – to become not only geographical, but a true part of European civilization, to overcome the consequences of totalitarian and imperial past, and to enter the family of free nations which are building their future based on shared values.

For that choice we have paid a terrible price – we have been subjected to military aggression, a part of our territory was occupied, there is a hybrid war against our country. But we are determined to defend our right to Freedom and Independence, and we think that the Dutch people with their history, with their centuries-old struggle for the right to live as free people in their country, can understand and support us.

Ukrainian PEN wrote:

For us, the Association Agreement is not about the economy, if only because, due to restrictive tariffs and trade barriers in crucial sectors, the EU will benefit most in the short to medium term. It is not even about the possibility of membership, however desirable. Most Ukrainians actually recognize its current infeasibility – and the Agreement does not envisage anything of the kind.

Rather, the Agreement is about Ukraine's becoming fully European. It's about guidance and guardianship, about "learning by doing", about the "conditionality machine" that makes further co-operation between the EU and Ukraine dependent on the speed and scope of implemented reforms.

It is up to the Dutch people to make their choice. We can only appeal to your moral sense, humanistic tradition, and strategic concern for the continent's future.

More than 80 former political prisoners from former Soviet republics issued this poignant appeal to the Dutch population to vote in favour of the Agreement:

It turned out that to fight for the values is much easier than to live in accordance with them. Probably everyone knows it from his own experience. To move the focus from survival to self-expression, from authoritarian norms to democratic values, under conditions of acute geopolitical threat from Russia is difficult. [...]

So, Ukraine needs time [...]

The *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* offers Ukrainians a chance, maybe their only chance for the next very long time. This Association Agreement will not solve all of Ukraine's problems overnight. The burden remains on Ukraine to implement difficult reforms. But this Association Agreement will transform Ukraine for the benefit of Ukrainians, the Netherlands, the European community, and global peace and security.

I ask you today to listen to the people of Ukraine. They are just like you.

Just like you, the Ukrainian people wish to live freely and with dignity in a democratic, prosperous and successful European country, in which fundamental freedoms and basic human rights are respected and the rule of law prevails.

Welcome them and everything Ukraine has to offer to you and to your country. The possibilities are truly endless and you will reap the benefits from a positive response much sooner than you think.

Once Ukraine succeeds in protecting its independence and territorial integrity, in implementing serious reforms that will ingrain democracy and significantly reduce corruption, and in overcoming its current economic crisis to become a flourishing European country, this will be the greatest modern-day success story, not only for Ukraine, but also for the EU and its member states, including the Netherlands.

I assure you that this will happen and when you look back, you will be proud to have contributed to such success.

Dear friends,

When I look at you, I see that most of you are my three children's age and I am concerned that your generation lives in a dangerous world with indiscriminate violence, as the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels have shown.

That is why, whenever an opportunity arises to render this world more stable, more secure and more democratic, we should seize it and not let go.

A fully European Ukraine will make this world better, safer and more secure.

That is why, beyond all the ads, statistics, arguments, speeches, debates, the “Yes” campaign and the “No” campaign, I ask you to do the right thing in our collective best interest, yours and mine.

I ask you to do what your conscience dictates and I trust that when you do that – you will make the right choice.

March 2016

Eugene Czolij
Ukrainian World Congress President

Sources: European External Action Service, Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine, Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, Ministry of Economic Affairs of the Netherlands, Ukraine Today, Euromaidan Press and *Ievropeyska Pravda*.