

Ukraine and Israel: A Dialogue in the Name of the Future

Victor Yushchenko

Victor Yushchenko is president of Ukraine. This article was adapted from his remarks before the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on November 15, 2007.

Speaking before you today is a great honor and also a great responsibility. I shall focus on the present state of relations, and our history, but the main thing is how we see our common future. Today my state visit is almost at an end. I think that this visit has been very successful and I would like to share with you some of what we have achieved. But first, I would like to say a few words about history.

I count myself among those politicians who believe that the relations between the Ukrainian and Jewish communities are of an historical nature. We are linked by the past, and I want to state frankly that too often, good things are forgotten and bad ones remembered. I know that from our side, there were many more kind, decent and generous acts than are remembered. Our nations coexisted for a long time. I want to emphasize that although traditionally we lived in different circumstances, the most important thing is that today our two nations are genuine friends. We enjoy a common understanding.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews were born in Ukraine and still reside there. We are living in a new millennium, and our policy regarding the Jewish minority and all other minorities is one of transparency and openness. One of the aims of Ukrainian democracy is to do everything possible for representatives of every minority, including the Jewish one, to lead lives in Ukraine which are as good as those in their traditional homelands. The main goal, in fact the real purpose, of my visit is to enhance our political relations, including the social, economic and humanitarian aspects—and to plan for the future. In other words, this is a call for direct action. But the question is: What can we do for our respective nations today? If the steps we take are minute, the attainments will also be minute.

The question is how to optimize our dialogue. It would be a great mistake for present-day Israel to forget its deep Ukrainian roots. That heritage has greatly contributed to the development of Jews and the Jewish State. We see the optimization of our relations in several fields.

We need to seriously improve the visa regime between our countries. We believe that Israelis should not need visas to enter Ukraine. In the last couple of years

since the Orange Revolution, we have started facilitating the issuance of visas for all EU citizens. I had to face opponents to that decision, but I prevailed. Right now, we have 2.6 times more tourists coming to Ukraine than before. You can hear every international language spoken in downtown Kiyiv. To be sure, this is not only about investment; it is about human contacts that will benefit both the people and the economy.

Therefore, I offered the Israeli side the possibility of joining this visa regime, as well. We offer visa facilitation to businessmen, politicians, journalists, athletes, artists and musicians, scientists and scholars and people who have families in Ukraine. We want to cancel the visa requirements for them. We would like to make the territories of our respective two states more accessible for our respective peoples.

We also have to work out a new agreement between Ukraine and Israel on investment protection. I am sure that Ukraine will be a World Trade Organization (WTO) member very soon. Therefore, I am offering, beginning on January 1, 2008, to initiate negotiations aimed at establishing a free-trade zone between Ukraine and Israel. I am sure this is a move for which tens of thousands of investors are waiting. We have to liberalize our trade relations to the maximum extent possible.

One of the most important issues in our relationship is our social and humanitarian cooperation. For example, we have already held two rounds of talks on the issue of pensions for our former nationals, and I proposed holding another one in a couple of months, perhaps as early as February. These talks will focus on providing Israeli citizens who were once citizens of Ukraine with pension provisions that will be carried out on the state level.

At present, we have a migration deficit between Ukraine and Israel of 8,000 people a year. I am sure that once we optimize our policies, mainly from the standpoint of human relations, this will change. This is a step aimed at granting people the right to choose their own domicile. Perhaps I am exaggerating, but I think that Jews from Israel will start coming back home to Ukraine.

We must also speak about our common historical memory. Ukraine has given a lot to the Jewish nation. We have given it many of its leaders, both religious and political, and governmental officials and businesspeople. We would like to perpetuate the memory of Ukrainian Jews. We would like to maintain museums and monuments, and other sites at which they are commemorated. We would like this to be a separate plan in our relations. This is very sensitive for human relations and can only be accomplished with mutual cooperation.

There are five sacred Jewish sites on our territory. It is sometimes very painful for Ukrainians and for those who come to Ukraine to go and visit those places. Some are maintained in lamentable fashion and do not enjoy the status they deserve. The fact that some of these places lack elementary infrastructure is a source of pain. So let us work out a common policy of how we should maintain the Jewish holy places in Ukraine, because this is the responsibility of businesspeople and the spiritual leaders.

We have spoken about heritage sites. There are 109 Jewish religious landmark buildings—here I mainly have in mind synagogues, eighty-four of which were already returned to the Jewish community. So, there are some twenty that have not yet been transferred. Nine of them are standing idle and are not used at all. In other places, especially in the Chernivtsi region, there are problems related to the resettlement of institutions and even the people presently housed in them. This is an issue not only affecting Jews, but also our Christian churches, and Orthodox Christianity in particular. The religious sites and landmarks should be turned over to the appropriate spiritual and religious institutions. This is the best way these places can be utilized, regardless of the religion in question. I am ready to work together with the Jewish community to achieve the best solution. This is certainly not a political issue, but rather a question of implementation. We have to formulate a joint plan of action. In so doing, we will avoid considerable problems.

A separate question altogether, but one that is always present in our bilateral relations, is the issue of the Holocaust. I will start by declaring that we are ready to cooperate closely with the Israeli government and corresponding public institutions. Yesterday, in the course of our negotiations with the government, and during our visit to Yad Vashem, we pledged that Ukraine would do everything possible to work out a program for this institution in Ukraine.

We know that every fourth Jew who perished in the Holocaust came from Ukraine. The Holocaust took place on Ukrainian soil. Therefore, both with the understanding of my political and state responsibilities, as well as on a human level, and in fact on a personal level, I believe we can accomplish a great deal—especially with the help of the various commemorative institutions. On some of the issues, we just need certain technical assistance. We sometimes need programs; we sometimes need contacts with the education ministry. We have to develop a plan that will be implemented in Ukraine in close connection with the corresponding Israeli institutions. I would like to mention in this context that we have given state awards to people who saved Jews during the Holocaust. This is the first time such people have been rewarded for their good deeds and granted recognition in Ukraine itself.

Several weeks ago, I issued a decree on returning the Torah scrolls deposited in various Ukrainian archives to the Jewish community. That fact, too, bears witness to our position, which is clear and transparent, in settling such delicate issues. You probably know that a new museum is under construction, the biggest museum in the world of its kind, dedicated to the Holocaust, and that it is located in Ukraine. We will also be asking for technical assistance to make this establishment the best it can be.

I am very happy that in present-day Ukraine, the phenomena of xenophobia and antisemitism hardly exist. Certainly on the very highest levels, no such ideology exists. As for individual incidents, I know that unfortunately, they can and do take place, but they are episodic in nature and I react to every such case. Generally, I would like to say that I am quite pleased that the malaise of antisemitism and xenophobia are not characteristic of Ukrainian society at large. This issue is related to our history. I know how some people reacted to my decision to award General Roman Shukhevych the status of hero of Ukraine, and I am compelled to underline my position once again.

You know that the freedom movement of Ukraine was always labeled as nationalistic. Jews were labeled with another appellation—enemies of the nation. I think that it is high time for us to live with open minds. Therefore, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that there was not one Ukrainian freedom organization (including that of General Roman Shukhevych) involved in persecuting Jews. During the Nuremberg trials, no freedom organization of Ukraine was recognized or exposed as one that fought against society. In the proceedings of that trial, there were no Ukrainian organizations mentioned on the list of those committing atrocities. I understand that I am now speaking about things that some people may not regard as accurate. That is why I offered Yad Vashem the opportunity to set up a working group to review all this. The attitude to the Ukrainian freedom movement is important to us; it is a sensitive issue for our nation. I have materials and documents stating that in the course of meetings of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Shukhevych signed a petition that prevented atrocities.

Of course there are not many rules in war. I understand that every nation, apart from heroes, has bastards—and I am sorry for using such language. These are the things that we need to think about. I am asking you not to use negative appellations and generalizations. For the sake of our mutual dialogue initiative, let us relegate this issue to the institutions entrusted with of national memory. In the near future, we will be welcoming experts from Yad Vashem in Ukraine. I am sure the corresponding programs will be established that will allow for the exchange of scientific, social and perhaps even political experience. I am ready to host these

meetings in Ukraine in cooperation with Yad Vashem. Therefore, I propose that we set aside our emotions and not rush to conclusions.

Fighting against antisemitism is one of the fundamentals of our international policy. Therefore, all the steps that we take we regard as state obligations. We need to regulate these issues on the legislative level. This is not only an emotional issue. I want to state openly that the Ukrainian government is always working on optimizing this situation. Even if you take statistics from the last two years, there is more cause for optimism than there has ever been.

But it is not enough to act only from above. We need to work with the Ukrainian community and with the Ukrainian people. Yesterday's meeting in Yad Vashem was devoted specifically to this. Ukraine needs programs that can be transmitted via radio, through television and through conferences to inform the population. You have the best experience in the world, and you are our partners. We want to benefit from your experience, including technical assistance.

In my entire life, I have never done anything that would bring harm to Jews. I will never allow, neither in activities with which I am involved, nor in the activities of the Ukrainian government, any negative approach or attitude to Israel and the Jewish nation. This is not only my political obligation; this is my personal, human obligation. And finally, very often when we speak about Israel's history, as well as Ukrainian history, both ancient and recent, we often witness the similarities between our two nations. Yesterday, when I was speaking in front of my Israeli colleagues, I said that when the last foundations of ancient Israel collapsed in 73 A.D., only the fundamentals of the Israeli state remained, and for two thousand years Israel had no state. Therefore, what has been done since 1948 deserves great acclaim. Ukrainians have not had a viable state since 1239. Yet the desire and longing to have an independent state still filled the hearts of millions of people. Our many attempts to set up independent states after that time ended in failure. As a rule, these states collapsed very quickly. This is the sixteenth time we regained our national dignity and state independence. This issue is sacred to us. Still, building democracy in Ukraine is not an easy task.

We are trying to jettison the former system, which had no real market economy. There was only one judge and one prosecutor in the country, and only one manager of the country—the president. We need to do a lot more on our own to build our democracy, but the last three years have signaled new hope for millions of Ukrainians. We have a fast-developing economy with GDP growth today estimated at 8 percent. Annual foreign direct investment in the Ukrainian economy ranges around 8 billion dollars, while three years ago we had less than 1 billion. Two-thirds of the total foreign direct investment for all the years of

Ukraine's independence were introduced in the last three years. We have the lowest unemployment rate ever in our history. Industrial growth ranges from 12-20 percent a year. Ukraine is being transformed.

I think the key challenges of Ukrainian democracy are as follows. First, for many years, we did not have an established political structure in society. That allowed, through the system of administrative actions, for the formation of any model of power, because very few people took part in developing the structure. We introduced a new election structure that is being implemented, the essence of which is that now only political parties participate. There used to be a proportional system of power. On the local level, this did not work because people wanted to see deputies who could be held accountable for their promises. Still, we are going through a phase of strengthening the political structure. Therefore, the year 2008 will be an eventful one for the evolving Ukrainian democracy. In terms of working on a new constitution, I already agreed with the two main political forces about the new constitution that will regulate the system of power and its checks and balances. The reason for the political crisis that emerged in the parliament recently was the imperfection of the constitution of 2004. That is why the new update to the constitution will provide a comprehensive response to the existing problems.

As president, I carry out a policy that is balanced in terms of the majority and the minority. I was the first leader in Ukraine to clearly state that the Ukrainian opposition had to have rights, including the right to form the agenda in the Parliament, to speak in the Parliament and the right to feel Ukraine's international relations are carried on with the participation of the opposition.

I think one of the greatest problems of Ukrainian politics and democracy was the absence of freedom of speech. When I was in the opposition, for approximately three years I did not appear on television because in the media, whether public or privately owned, one could only see President Kuchma. TV stations all acclaimed the president. For the past two years, however, we have had freedom of speech. You can turn on a television set in Ukraine and you can see for yourself how accessible the media is to the various political currents. Of course, there are some challenges here. It is a question of how to define a free press. It is a situation in which journalists can think on their own without any external influence. But still, I believe you understand how complicated it is for a president to work under such conditions in a young, emerging democracy. You cannot manage to do everything in a year. Ukrainian democracy helped introduce Ukraine to the world and helped introduce the world to Ukraine.

We had parliamentary elections over the past two years. I would really like to have a more stable political situation. It is lamentable that the Parliament cannot

hold its first session and appoint the head of the working group. This underlines the fact that it is very hard to bring those two sides together. It is a pity that a political crisis emerged, but the most important test is if democratic Ukraine can respond to critical challenges. I am sure we have sufficient democratic tools to find the correct solution to the existing problems, without bullets, without blood, without tanks and military operations. We exercised great restraint and we are cognizant of that fact.

As for the rest of the problems, such as the extensive presence of big business in politics, I am sure that there should be a greater distance between them. Big business should not have such considerable impact on the government. We have not achieved that yet. This is a challenge that we must face. One of the main reasons business got involved in government was to protect its interests, to ensure its immunity and to advance its agenda. When we say that we are renewing the supremacy of law, we mean that we will have an honest prosecutor's office, and honest democracy. Immunity for members of Parliament will be canceled. These are my initiatives in recent months, and I will work to see that those initiatives are accepted in Parliament. I am sure we will succeed in combating corruption. The corruption was not brought about by the Orange Revolution; it was brought about by the former regimes. We will combat it, but this is not an issue that can be resolved within a year. When we say that we have these problems, we understand that recognition is the first step toward solving them.

I am sure it will not take long before we sign an agreement with the EU that will foresee an associated membership for Ukraine. I am paying most of my attention to this issue because this is the essence of Ukraine's foreign policy—the aspiration to acquire EU membership and membership in NATO. Ukraine strives to live within the European security model. Europeans are not for military resistance or security resistance. For Ukraine, it is impossible to implement a model of military self-sufficiency. That is why the best way to build an effective security policy in Ukraine is to join the European model of collective security, meaning the Euro-Atlantic model. You will remember that the geographic center of Europe is Ukraine. Our values are European values. We cannot speak of European values and refrain from using European tools to protect these values. This is logical; this is clear. This is not a policy directed against anybody. This is a policy aimed at protecting the national interests of Ukraine. I believe and I hope that today's visit has already laid new foundations in our bilateral relations.

This is the beginning of a new dynamic. I have seen many remarkable friends of Ukraine here in Israel who wisely evaluate Ukrainian efforts to introduce our country in the international arena. I am sure every one of you supports this idea because I am sure that if you did not respect Ukraine, you would not have come

here today. Therefore, I thank you for coming here this morning—for your kind hearts, for your appreciation of our relations. It was very important for me to convey my positions and explain the rationale used by the Ukrainians. I was gratified to let you know what is at the heart of the relations between our countries and our societies. I thank you for your attention. It was a great honor for me to speak to you today.