

Introducing the Ukrainian-Austrian Association

New association seeks to strengthen existing bilateral ties and overcome business barriers



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The ties linking Ukraine and Austria stretch back for centuries and encompass everything from politics and the arts to cuisine and coffee shop culture. Meanwhile, in the contemporary context relations remain close. Comparatively small Austria is one of the leading investors in Ukraine, enjoying particularly prominent representations in the banking, insurance and industrial sectors. Cultural connections are also a prominent feature of today's Ukrainian-Austrian relationship, with Ukrainian performers held in particularly high esteem by Austrian classical music enthusiasts.

Thanks to the advent of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, this already robust partnership looks poised to grow even stronger. In order to take bilateral ties to the next level, we decided recently to establish the Ukrainian-Austrian Association (UAA). Fittingly, the UAA was officially registered as a non-profit organization in late summer 2017, shortly after the final ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in Brussels. We chose to see this as a positive portent.

Introducing Austrians to the New Ukraine

The core mission of the UAA is to foster greater civil society relations between Austria and Ukraine at all levels. Within this framework, we also hope to be able to introduce Austrian audiences to the historic transformations taking place in post-Maidan Ukraine. We recognize there is no substitute for personal contact. By sharing our Ukrainian experiences with our Austrian colleagues, the UAA membership will take on the role of a persuasive advocate for the new Ukraine. At a time when Ukraine is seeking to overcome decades of negative coverage and image ambiguity, positive and constructive insights into the realities of living and working in the country can be particularly valuable.

The UAA seeks to be a two-way street, offering Austrian audiences first-hand accounts of today's Ukraine while also bringing both countries closer together

through joint initiatives in the cultural, business and social spheres. In the business sector, our emphasis will be very much on fostering focused B2B relationships in the areas that matter most for both countries. Ukraine and Austria already enjoy a thriving bilateral business relationship, but there are huge opportunities for the further expansion of cooperation. This means identifying potential gains and working with existing business and civil society organizations to bring Ukrainians and Austrians together and create platforms for direct communication.

Overcoming Cultural Barriers to Business

This support for better business connections will extend to individual investment projects and cooperation initiatives. Despite the progress made in recent years by Ukrainian companies towards greater European integration and adoption of EU standards, it is still often possible to identify differences in mentality and expectations that can serve as barriers to business between potential Ukrainian and EU partners. Cultural clashes can still sometimes derail what would otherwise have been perfectly workable (and highly profitable) joint endeavors. Our objective is to help Ukrainian and Austrian businesses overcome these obstacles wherever possible. We plan to offer training programs for Ukrainian companies on practical subjects like the preparation of business proposals and investment plans. The aim is to provide these insights to the Ukrainian business community in partnership with the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and to empower the next generation via cooperation with Ukraine's leading business schools and universities. There is no reason why commercial cooperation opportunities should fall victim to relatively minor and avoidable differences in approach.

Engaging Kyiv's International Community

In addition to bilateral activities, UAA also aims to play an active role within Ukraine's dynamic international business and civil society sector. The association has already been invited to join the recently established International Council of Business Organizations and Chambers of Ukraine, which was set up in spring 2017 and unites business organizations from Germany, France, the UK, the US, Turkey, China and Ukraine. We will also welcome membership applications from beyond Ukraine and Austria. We received over 20 membership enquiries before the UAA was officially registered, suggesting considerable interest in the initiative and enthusiasm for greater Austrian-Ukrainian engagement.

As President and Chairman of the Management Board, I will share my experience as a senior executive at several multinationals, together with insights garnered from over ten years of living in Ukraine. The Austrian side of UAA activities will be directly overseen by Stefan Haboeck, who will also occupy a position on the UAA Board of Directors. As a newly founded association, we are both honored and thrilled to announce the participation of former Vice-Chancellor of Austria Dr. Erhard Busek as President of the UAA Supervisory Committee. His kind involvement will provide a significant boost to the association's activities while adding weight to our initiatives. Dr. Busek has a long record of activities in support of Eastern European ties with the European Union. His readiness to take on a role with the UAA reflects the high level of interest in strengthening bilateral ties with Ukraine. We aim to contribute to this process in a way that will increase mutual understanding, boost business cooperation, and bring Ukraine closer to the heart of Europe.