

Ministers, colleagues, dear Ukrainian and international friends.

I am very pleased to be invited to speak on the occasion of the launch of the next phase of U-Lead with Europe.

I have been Denmark's ambassador since 2020. During the full-scale Russian attack, I have seen with own eyes the crucial role that local and regional authorities have played as the backbone of local and regional governance and service delivery under wartime condition.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank the mayors and municipal representatives present here this morning for your sterling work.

Please convey my warmest thanks to your staff in your communities - municipal workers, nurses, teachers and fire fighters and many others for their hard work to ensure the safety and survival of your citizens during the Russian aggression.

The role of local and regional authorities during the full-scale Russian attack is one of Ukraine's untold success stories.

It did not happen by itself.

One of the reasons is the visionary decentralization process that took place in 2019, that created bigger communities with their own fiscal powers. Denmark is proud to have supported this through the earlier phases of U-LEAD.

Back in 2019 the decentralization process in Ukraine was not something that attracted a lot of attention internationally.

Nor was there a lot of interest in the local elections that were held in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic. I was here at that time and I remember that the OSCE characterized the elections as "calm and well-organized".

The experience since the full-scale Russian attack has shown that effective, transparent and accountable local governance had indeed been achieved. The mayors who were elected back in 2020 had a strong mandate from their citizens when suddenly they had to operate under war-time conditions.

I can say that based on personal experience. I have visited many of the frontline communities. And since April 2022 I have been working closely with the regional and local authorities of the city and the Oblast of Mykolaiv.

As many of you will know, Denmark assumed the patronage for the rebuilding and reconstruction of the city and the oblast of Mykolaiv back in April 2022.

This patronage was suggested by president Zelensky when he spoke on line to the Danish parliament on the 29. March 2022 at one of the darkest moments of the Russian full-scale aggression.

In the beginning reactions in Copenhagen were mixed. There were voices saying that a regional approach would be risky and that it would be better to support reconstruction nationwide through multilateral institutions.

Last but not least there were worries about corruption. By assuming the patronage of the reconstruction process we would be directly exposed to the risk of corruption. It would be less risky to give the money to multinational institutions and let them assume the risk.

However, when our Prime Minister came to Kyiv in April 2022 the partnership was sealed.

Work started immediately focusing on winterization of the city and establishment of emergency water supply as the Russians had cut of the water supply from neighboring Kherson Oblast.

It went well thanks to a seamless cooperation with the local, regional and national authorities and Danish and international humanitarian organizations.

We have now moved on to the next phase, focusing on rebuilding social and physical infrastructure and not least restarting economic life by assisting private enterprises getting back in business. That is a big wish in Mykolaiv. It is an enterprising city and region and they prefer to earn their own money.

It turned out to be difficult because no lenders – Ukrainian or international – would lend money to local businesses because of the proximity to the frontline. Denmark had to create a special facility in the Danish Ukraine fund that can issue export credits and loans to enterprises close to the frontline. It has worked well and many jobs are back. People are getting a salary and they start paying taxes, thus supporting the local economy.

So all in all, the partnership is working well. We now have an embassy office in Mykolaiv, supporting the partnership.

But the success is thanks to our Ukrainian partners, the governor, the mayor, the head of the regional council and the national authorities. They are all pulling in the same direction and their cooperation is smooth and seamless.

The partnership would not have been possible without the decentralization reform back in 2019 and the local elections in 2020.

Thus, local governance that is transparent and accountable is crucial for Ukraine's resilience under wartime conditions.

It is however also crucial for Ukraine's European aspirations. The Copenhagen criteria are crystal clear. To become a member of the European Union a candidate country must demonstrate the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy and the rule of law. This applies both to national and local democracies.

With the impressive results in local government I have witnessed since I arrived in 2020 I have no doubt the Ukraine will pass that hurdle with flying colors.

Let me conclude by thanking the staff of U-LEAD for their hard and dedicated work. Denmark is proud to support you in the next phase.