

**Olivér Várhelyi**  
Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement  
Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations  
European Commission

Dear Commissioner,

In June 2022 Ukraine was granted the status of EU candidate country. During an extraordinary session of the European Council in February 2023 the EU leaders acknowledged Ukraine's significant efforts to achieve the goals underlying its status as a candidate for EU membership. The leaders also encouraged Ukraine to fulfil the conditions specified in the Commission's opinion in order to get closer to its future EU membership.

Like other local government organisations, the Association of Polish Cities supports Ukraine's integration with the EU. In May 2022 the Board of the APC asked representatives of the Polish government to call on the Council of the European Union to immediately accept Ukraine's application for the status of candidate for Union membership. Given our experience of many years of cooperating with Ukrainian local government organisations, especially with the Association of Ukrainian Cities, and Ukrainian local governments, it was obvious to us that Ukraine's place was in the European community.

Poland, including Polish local governments, made a significant contribution to the decentralising reform carried out in Ukraine, elements of which included a change in the structure of Ukrainian municipalities – the process of creating united municipalities (Ukrainian: OTG) as well as empowering cities and municipalities to formulate strategies for development and financial management on the local level.

Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine has slowed down this development process and channeled the considerably reduced incomes of local communities into ad hoc activities necessitated by the aggressor's methodical destruction of critical infrastructure, public facilities and residential buildings.

At the same time, however, representatives of Ukrainian local governments unanimously stress that the effects of the decentralisation, implemented since 2016, include their greater decision-making powers in a situation of crisis management brought about by the war as well as the citizens' huge identification with their little homelands and, consequently, their involvement in the fight for independent Ukraine.

After the invasion of 24 February 2022 citizens, local communities and civic organisations from Polish cities and villages provided care and in 2023 continue to provide unprecedented support to millions of war refugees from Ukraine. Through a network of Polish-Ukrainian partner cities, as well as partnerships from Germany, France, Italy, the Baltic States and other EU countries, humanitarian aid and other necessary support are continuously delivered to Ukraine.

However, it needs to be stressed that the main narrative we hear from Ukrainian local governments concerns the development perspective relating to the (re)construction of Ukraine and the expected continuing EU association process.

The Polish experience unambiguously shows how significant a role is played in the process by local governments. In the pre-accession period Polish local governments and NGOs planned and implemented thousands of soft and infrastructural projects. This was possible only thanks to **EU pre-accession funds** - Phare, ISPA, SAPARD - for which we were able to apply. The funds not only improved citizens' quality of life, but also taught democracy, transparency and implementation of European values at the grassroots level.

Today Polish local governments are open and ready to support their Ukrainian partners in an analogous process; however, the know-how they are willing to share is not sufficient. Ukraine – including Ukrainian local governments – needs access to European funds, analogous to those used by Poland in the pre-accession period. At the moment the available funds (e.g. Interreg Next) are open to a small group of Ukrainian and Polish recipients (as well as recipients from other EU countries covered by cross-border programmes).

We want to stress that Polish-Ukrainian partnerships stretch from the eastern frontiers of Ukraine to the western border of Poland. The support also covers Ukrainian local communities still under Russian occupation. The local governments from e.g. the Azov region, like Mariupol, Melitopol, Berdiansk and others, already want to cooperate and develop plans for future (re)construction and integration.

**That is why we call on the European Commission to urgently develop and announce funds making it possible to carry out soft and infrastructural projects, in cooperation with EU partners, for Ukraine, including, especially, its local government units.**

**One of the quickest actions could be to extend the coverage of the cross-border programme package, the Interreg Next, which should cover the whole territory of Ukraine and of Poland.**

Tychy, 16 June 2023

On behalf of the Board of the Association of Polish Cities

Zygmunt Frankiewicz

PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION (electronically signed)

*Cc: European Committee of the Regions*

*Council of European Municipalities and Regions*