



In dialogue with Mr. Sándor Szelekovszky, Head of Trade Section at the European Delegation to the United Arab Emirates



Q Over the past 16 years, you have worked in the areas of trade and economics in various functions in the European Commission. Can you tell us a little more about what your experience entailed?

A Over the past 16 years, I have had the privilege of serving as an official in the European Commission, working in various trade and economic policy roles. Prior to that, I also gained valuable experience as a Hungarian official and diplomat for 15 years. My work has taken me to numerous countries, and I have had the opportunity to engage in both bilateral and multilateral contexts, such as the OECD, WTO, and the EU.

A key insight from my extensive career is the undeniable connection between trade and economic relations and the overall political context. In other words, it is essential to create a supportive political environment to foster strong, sustainable, and long-lasting trade relationships between countries. Additionally, it is crucial to establish a transparent, accountable regulatory environment that adheres to the best international practices. This involves setting clear national regulations, standards, and procedures and ensuring their consistent enforcement.

Q In September last year, you took up a new appointment based in Abu Dhabi as the Head of the Trade Section of the European Union to the UAE. You are also responsible for EU trade matters in the State of Kuwait. How did you feel about taking up this role in the GCC? What are the most challenging aspects of further developing EU trade and investment with the GCC member countries?

A I was thrilled to take up the role as Head of the Trade Section of the European Union Delegation to the UAE and to be responsible for EU trade matters in the State of Kuwait. This position in the GCC region was my top choice when applying for international postings, and I had already been working with GCC countries in Brussels prior to my move to Abu Dhabi.

It's important to note that the EU has established strong trade and investment ties with GCC countries, and while it may not be widely recognized, the EU-27 Member States together represent the second largest trading partner and the largest investor in the region, with a substantial margin. The latest trade figures for 2022 show impressive growth in EU-GCC trade, which highlights the solid foundation we have already built in our bilateral economic cooperation.

Upcoming major events in the region, such as COP28 and the next WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13), present new opportunities to engage in emerging areas of economic importance. Additionally, as a consequence of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified aggression, fostering cooperation in the energy sector between the EU and GCC, including renewable energy, has become a priority.

As for the challenges, one area where the EU is eager to support our partners in the region is the harmonisation of norms and standards at the GCC level. Based on our experience in the EU, we firmly believe that a regional approach promotes economic growth and competitiveness, as well as enhances trade relations.



In May 2022 the EU published a Joint Communication detailing a Strategic Partnership with the Gulf. Significantly the Joint Communication proposes a stronger partnership in a series of key policy areas and sets out a number of concrete proposals for the EU and the GCC to strengthen cooperation in their mutual interests. What are the main opportunities under this partnership?



The Joint Communication demonstrates a strong commitment from both EU Institutions and Member States to elevate their relationship with the GCC countries, forging a strategic partnership that is vital to the EU's political, economic, and security interests. This document highlights the numerous areas of existing and potential cooperation, showcasing the untapped potential for economic collaboration at both regional and individual GCC country levels.

In light of the global context, which continues to be influenced by the recent pandemic, and affected by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the escalating climate crisis, new avenues for economic cooperation are emerging. These include innovative agricultural technologies for ensuring food security, sustainable and circular economic models, green hydrogen and renewable energy production, healthcare system development, digitalisation, and e-commerce, among others. As the world's largest integrated internal market, the EU brings to the table its leading technologies, and regulations in these areas offering valuable opportunities for mutual growth and development.



The EU is fighting climate change through ambitious policies at home and in close cooperation with international partners. How can the EU's experience and expertise in tackling climate change assist the GCC countries in addressing this global problem?



The EU has a long-standing commitment to combating climate change and has made significant progress in establishing a comprehensive regulatory framework, including the world's first and only functioning Emission Trading System. This framework plays a critical role in incentivising the transition to climate neutrality. Recent events, such as Russia's weaponization of energy and the resulting instability in global energy markets, have only strengthened the EU's resolve to achieve its climate objectives under the EU's Green Deal and in accordance with the Paris Agreement.

Over the past year, the EU has taken concrete steps to accelerate the green energy transition, including expediting renewable energy projects, improving energy efficiency, and enhancing energy cooperation with reliable partners like the GCC countries in order to diversify our supply sources. As such, the EU is well-positioned to assist the GCC countries by sharing best regulatory practices, providing a substantial and reliable market for energy products, particularly green hydrogen, and renewables, which could play a vital role in shaping alternative economic models for the GCC region in a post-fossil fuel era.

Additionally, the EU offers cutting-edge technologies and solutions in the field of circular economy. The upcoming COP28 event in Dubai presents a unique opportunity for engagement with the UAE as the host country, as well as other GCC countries. Climate-related cooperation, including within an economic context, has become a high-priority aspect of our interactions with the GCC region. The EU and its Member States are preparing for COP28 with determination and ambition, as we believe it is an occasion to make bold, transformative decisions to address the urgent challenge of climate change that affects us all.



The EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project works closely with EU Delegations in the GCC in sharing with GCC partners EU expertise and experience relevant to these countries in their ongoing economic diversification efforts. However, dialogue is a two-way flow. What can the EU learn from the GCC countries in developing the European economy?



Indeed, the EU-funded project should be seen as a platform for exchanging best practices from which both sides can greatly benefit. The goal is not to replicate each other's practices, but rather to identify the most relevant elements in our partners' approaches that can be used to improve our own systems. There are numerous areas in which the EU closely observes the remarkable economic developments in the GCC countries with keen interest and openness, as evidenced by our eagerness to further engage with these nations under the EU-GCC Strategic Partnership Communication.

I would like to emphasize that this project serves as a vital tool in our daily work within the GCC countries, particularly in my case with the UAE and Kuwait. It allows us to engage with relevant stakeholders to exchange best practices and identify new business opportunities that benefit both EU and GCC operators.