CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF EU-UGANDA TIES

By Nelson Kiva

Uganda's celebration of Europe Day is beyond a diplomatic handshake with Brussels. It marks over 50 years of ties built on shared ideals of unity.

For Dr Swaib Kaggwa Nsereko, a mass communication lecturer at the Islamic University in Uganda, the anniversary is not pageantry. It is about substance.

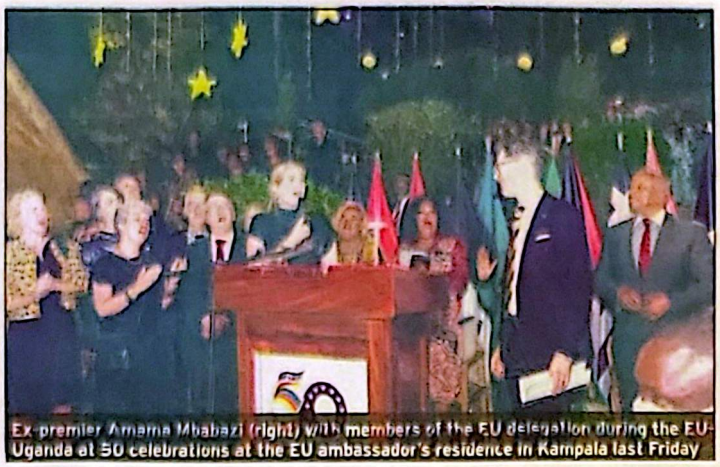
"It offers a moment to assess a relationship that has evolved from traditional development aid into a broader partnership spanning trade, governance, climate action and investment," Nsereko says.

Every May 9, the Europeans, joined by the world in solidarity, celebrate Europe Day and this year marks the 76th anniversary since the historic Schuman Declaration of 1950, the proposal that laid the foundation for today's EU.

To mark the occasion, many events take place in EU member states and around the world, bringing together citizens from all walks of life.

The annual celebration honours peace, unity, democracy, and co-operation among European nations.

From Brussels and Strasbourg to Frankfurt and Luxembourg, Europe Day events will include open-door visits to EU institutions, cultural festivals, live music performances, educational programmes, food exhibitions, family activities, and public discussions about Europe's future.



Ex-premier Amama Mbabazi (right) with members of the EU delegation during the EU-Uganda at 50 celebrations at the EU ambassador's residence in Kampala last Friday

According to Brussels, the 2026 edition is especially significant because it marks 40 years since Spain and Portugal joined the bloc, as well as four decades of official Europe Day celebrations and the first public use of the EU flag and anthem.

Relations between the EU and Uganda officially began 26 years later in 1976, marking the start of a partnership that has grown steadily.

What started as diplomatic engagement has evolved into a broad relationship covering development co-operation, trade, governance, humanitarian support, education, and regional security.

Nsereko says the move to establish formal relations at the time Uganda was going through turbulent times, reflected the European Community's interest in strengthening ties with African nations and supporting Uganda's social and economic stability.

In 1976, Uganda was facing political and economic challenges that affected national stability and development under the leadership of former president Idi Amin.

Despite these difficulties, the European Community, which later became the European Union, sought to maintain constructive engagement with Uganda.

Nsereko says the diplomatic relations created opportunities for dialogue, co-operation, and assistance aimed at improving the welfare of Ugandan citizens and strengthening institutions.

Over the years, the partnership between Brussels and Kampala has expanded significantly.

The EU has become one of Uganda's largest development partners, supporting projects in infrastructure, agriculture, health, education, energy and governance.

Through various development programmes, the EU has contributed to road construction, access to clean water, rural electrification, and improvement of public services across the country.

On the trade front, Uganda benefits from access to European markets under trade arrangements designed to support developing countries.

Exports such as coffee, fish, flowers, cocoa, and agricultural products have found markets in Europe, helping to generate income and employment for many Ugandans.

At the same time, European businesses have invested in Uganda in sectors including energy, telecommunications, and manufacturing.

The EU has also played a key role in promoting peace, democracy, and human rights in Uganda and the wider East African region.

Through election observation missions, governance programmes, and support for civil society organisations, the EU has encouraged transparency, accountability, and democratic participation.

In times of humanitarian crises, including refugee emergencies and public health challenges, the EU has provided humanitarian aid and emergency assistance to vulnerable communities.

Education and cultural exchange have further strengthened the relationship.

Many Ugandan students and professionals have benefited from EU-funded scholarship programmes such as Erasmus+, which promote international learning and academic co-operation.

The EU head of delegation to Kampala, Ambassador Jan Sadek, has since indicated that 50 years is a long time.

"What we are celebrating is a simple but powerful partnership that has been adapted, and delivered," Sadek says.

Over five decades, the EU has channelled over sh2 trillion in development assistance into Uganda, matched by a similar scale of private European investment.

These flows have supported projects ranging from roads and energy to education, healthcare and refugee response.

The EU support in the early years focused on rebuilding a country emerging from political and economic instability.

Infrastructure rehabilitation, rural development and access to essential services dominated the agenda.

But today, according to the EU top diplomat in the country, that engagement has broadened into a multi-sector partnership aligned with Uganda's national development plans, co-ordinated in part through the foreign affairs ministry of Uganda.

Across the country, EU-backed programmes have funded schools, health centres, water systems and transport networks. In rural districts, water and sanitation projects have expanded access to safe water, while energy investments have increased electricity generation and reliability, laying the groundwork for industrial growth.

One flagship example is the planned rehabilitation of the Nalubaale-Kiira Hydropower complex, supported by an EU grant expected to unlock further European financing, which illustrates a shift towards leveraging public funds to crowd in private capital.

The government of France and EU have committed sh735b towards the rehabilitation of Uganda's Nalubaale and Kiira hydropower stations in Jinja. Economic co-operation has become a central pillar of the relationship.

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