

Despite law, Ukraine lags in bringing transparency to defense industry spending → Page 2

Shmyhal sees new wave of coronavirus infections as vaccination rate remains low → Page 3

Vladislav Davidzon: Moscow divide creates tensions between Kyiv and Minsk → Page 5

Iuliia Mendel: Zelensky will be the president who ends Ukraine's oligarchic era → Page 8

Biden's early sanctions seen as too soft to deter the Kremlin, other bad actors → Page 10



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Screen Masters

As Zelensky shuts 3 pro-Kremlin channels, 5 oligarchs still run Ukrainian airwaves, driving the public agenda



See story on page 6

After President Volodymyr Zelensky on Feb. 2, 2021, shut down three TV channels that broadcast Kremlin propaganda, it was welcomed as a big step towards cleansing Ukrainian TV. However, as the dust settled, it became clear that Ukrainian TV remains the same as it has been for more than a decade: an influence tool for a handful of oligarchs. The group remains the same: Ihor Kolomoisky, Rinat Akhmetov, Victor Pinchuk, Petro Poroshenko, and the partnership of Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Lyovochkin. Together, they control nearly 70% of the Ukrainian television. They use it to promote their business interests and blast opponents. Zelensky said he wants to limit the oligarchs' influence on the TV channels they own, but, aside from the Medvedchuk move, has not followed through. Meanwhile, more Ukrainians turn to internet for information, bypassing traditional TV.



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ТОВ "БІЗНЕСГРУПП"

Головний редактор
Брайан Боннер

Відповідальний за випуск
Брайан Боннер

Адреса видавця та засновника
співпадають: Україна, м. Київ, 01033,
вул. Желянська, 68, 2-й поверх.
Реєстраційне свідоцтво
Кв № 23191-13031ПР від 29.03.2018.
Передплатний індекс ДП Преса 40528
Надруковано ТОВ «Новий друк»,
02660, Київ, вулиця Магнітогорська, 1,
тел.: 559-9148
З приводу розміщення реклами
звертайтеся: +380 44 591-7788
Відповідальність за зміст реклами
несе замовник.

Mailing address:
Kyiv Post, 68 Zhylianska St.,
Kyiv, Ukraine, 01033

Advertising
tel. +380 44 591-7788
advertising@kyivpost.com

Editorial staff
tel. +380 44 591-3344
news@kyivpost.com

Subscription & Distribution
tel. +380 44 591-3344
subscribe@kyivpost.com

Employment Advertising
tel. +380 44 591-7788
advertising@kyivpost.com

Adnan Kivan
Publisher

Brian Bonner
Executive Director/Chief Editor

Olga Rudenko | **Alyona Nevmerzhytska**
Deputy Chief Editor | Commercial Director

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An engineer walks past five freshly repaired T-72 battle tanks at the Kyiv Armored Vehicles Plant in Kyiv on Feb. 24, 2021.

Illia Ponomarenko

Ukraine lags in transparency on defense industry spending

By Illia Ponomarenko
ponomarenko@kyivpost.com

No one in Ukraine expected the reform of defense procurement — the source of decades-long multibillion dollar corruption — to be quick and easy.

But government officials seem to be doing their best to make it as hard as possible.

A groundbreaking law introducing a new transparent and competitive procurement of goods and services for the armed forces and other uniformed services was signed into force in August.

Yet, it is not working. The ministries of defense and strategic industries have missed every deadline to adopt the many bylaws the new system needs.

Now the whole industry stands on the brink of chaos. The old, Soviet-style model of defense procurement must be eliminated by March 31. The new system is not even close to ready.

The government is rushing to pass

bylaws bit by bit to try and save the day. Meanwhile, the expert community is sounding the alarm, saying that many of these regulations at best still carry corruption risks or at worst contradict the reform's very idea.

The mayhem in government offices risks paralyzing the country's military procurement, amid the ongoing proxy war with Russia.

Many fear that Ukraine's defense sector might not even see transparent and corruption-proof tenders until at least 2022.

Comfortably opaque

The long-awaited bill strongly advocated by pro-reform experts and Western advisers encompassed scores of steps to eliminate apocalyptic corruption in the industry.

Large businesses close to or owned by top officials usually get the first pick of the juiciest defense contracts.

For example, in 2015–2019, then-President Petro Poroshenko and his long-time business partner and National Security and Defense

Council secretary Oleh Hladkovsky were among the top non-government contractors for the military.

Poroshenko's shipyard in Kyiv produced gunboats for the navy, and Hladkovsky's Bohdan Motors used to reassemble Chinese trucks as medical vehicles for the army.

Loose and convenient regulations allowed officials to classify any procurement deal and choose contractors and prices at their own discretion with no competitive tenders.

This often led to unfettered corruption, wrapped in insincere excuses. A common tongue-in-cheek example is the strict secrecy surrounding the procurement of boots for soldiers, supposedly to avoid giving away unit strength.

According to Hlib Kanievskyi, head of Kyiv-based anti-graft watchdog StateWatch, the total value of procured goods and services for the military, police, National Guard, State Border Service and other security agencies amounts to at least Hr 40 billion (\$1.44 billion) a year.

Defense acquisition is considered among the worst corruption hotspots in Ukraine. In its review, global anti-graft organization Transparency International estimated corruption risks in the country's sector as "high."

Transparency International gave Ukraine 50 points out of 100 for defense purchase transparency; 42 points for oversight; and 63 for its defense anti-corruption legislation.

All deadlines missed

The new bill was supposed to introduce a civilized procurement model.

"It launches tenders held in full parity for state-run and private companies," Kanievskyi said.

"It broadens competition and introduces a reasonable model of secrecy, under which only certain

very unique hardware can be procured under classified direct contracts. But at the same time, the community will be able to execute democratic control of other contracts signed via open competitive tenders."

The bill provides for the creation of a defense contractor registry. This is meant to stop officials from using short-lived sham companies to sell equipment stolen or decommissioned from military warehouses back to the Ministry of Defense at inflated prices.

"The registry will show all companies involved in defense procurement so that anyone could check what's going on," Kanievskyi said.

According to former Defense Minister Andriy Zagorodnyuk, the bill's implementation was among the crucial requirements for American military assistance in 2020, as well as of Ukraine's further rapprochement with NATO.

The ministries of defense and strategic industries were supposed to develop some 20 bylaws synchronizing defense procurement with the new legislation. President Volodymyr Zelensky in August ordered the government to complete the process by mid-February, as required by the bill.

The bylaws were expected to be completed by the end of 2020 so that the new system could be launched by the start of the fiscal year 2021.

But the bylaws' first drafts were

Shmyhal: COVID-19 in Ukraine enters dangerous new wave

By Oleksiy Sorokin
sorokin@kyivpost.com

Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal on March 4 said Ukraine has entered the third wave of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The prime minister doesn't rule out the possibility of a future nationwide lockdown.

"It's obvious that the third wave of the pandemic has started. Strict restrictions in Ivano-Frankivsk and Chernivtsi oblasts have already been introduced," Shmyhal said during his press conference.

"A few more regions are on the way (to new restrictions)," he added.

Earlier, Health Minister Maksym Stepanov said that the ministry had no plans to impose a new country-wide lockdown in March or April because the January lockdown yielded good results.

But the situation in multiple parts of the country has worsened since then.

"If the situation worsens, if we see that medics are not coping, then we will probably have no choice but to impose strict quarantine like the one that we have already experienced," Shmyhal said on March 4.

"I really wouldn't want that," he added.

Moreover, as of March 4, only about 10,000 people have been vaccinated in the nation.

Three Ukrainian oblasts, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi and Zakarpattia, had to shut down their entertainment businesses and restaurants for a week starting Feb. 22 because of spikes in their numbers of cases.

Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast also imposed the "red" quarantine level,



Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal speaks with journalists at a press conference in Kyiv on March 4, 2021. The resurgence of the coronavirus was a major topic, with Shmyhal suggesting there might be another nationwide lockdown as vaccinations lag. About 10,000 people have received vaccinations as of March 4.

shutting down all non-essential businesses and banning mass events on Feb. 22–28.

As of the morning of March 4, the largest numbers of new cases have been recorded in Zhytomyr Oblast (888), the city of Kyiv (868), Vinnytsya Oblast (827),


Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast (776) and Zakarpattia Oblast (676).

Ukraine has registered 10,057 new cases of COVID-19 as of 9 a.m. on March 4, bringing the total number of cases in the country since the start of the pandemic to nearly 1.4 million.

The new daily infections have doubled since March 1, when 4,285 new cases were recorded.

Furthermore, Ukraine has faced a growing number of patients hospitalized with COVID-19. In late February, a number of hospitals in western Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast

were full. On Feb. 22, the first mobile hospital began operating in the region.

On March 2, 3,486 people were hospitalized, the largest number since the start of the pandemic. 



Zelensky meets with European Council head

President Volodymyr Zelensky and European Council President Charles Michel take part in a joint press conference in Mariyinsky Palace in Kyiv on March 3, 2021.

ON THE MOVE

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Redcliffe Partners hires new partner Sergiy Ignatovsky to join its leading Litigation and Restructuring practices



Sergiy Ignatovsky

Redcliffe Partners is pleased to announce our new partner Sergiy Ignatovsky, who joins the firm's leading Litigation and Restructuring practices.

Sergiy is one of the top professionals in Ukraine focusing on restructurings, high-profile complex litigation and special situations.

His professional background is diverse. Sergiy has previously worked for many years as a partner in the litigation groups of several leading Ukrainian law firms, as well as General Counsel with Metinvest, one of the largest CEE producers of steel and iron ore raw materials.

In 2016, Sergiy was appointed by the creditors' committee as the General Counsel of Mriya Agro Holding. He was responsible for carrying out the complicated, unprecedented and unique restructuring of the group, which included more than 150 companies, following its USD1.3 billion default. As General Counsel, Sergiy oversaw the handling of hundreds of court proceedings and dozens of bankruptcies throughout Ukraine, and advised on the subsequent sale of Mriya Agro Holding to a strategic investor.

In 2019-2020, Sergiy was a Deputy Head of the State Property Fund of Ukraine, where he was in charge of corporate governance for state-owned enterprises.

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EDITORIALS

Soft sanctions

It will take a long time to undo the damage to global human rights that took place with a combination of hostile U.S. leadership under Donald J. Trump and the typically limp-wristed European Union in standing up for democratic values. The West's febleness is one reason why the Freedom House, in its latest annual report this week, has found that democracy is on the retreat globally.

Unfortunately, the early signs are that U.S. President Joe Biden is going to be another Barack Obama lightweight when it comes to putting any real bite into lofty pronouncements about democracy and human rights.

During Obama's two terms, the U.S. aligned its actions against Russia's war on Ukraine with the EU. The 27-nation bloc is unable to conduct effective foreign policy, and the Kremlin exploits this weakness. Consequently, the West let Russia run over Ukraine, seizing Crimea and the eastern Donbas in the war that lingers today — 7% of territory lost indefinitely. A much quicker, more robust combination of military aid and economic sanctions on Vladimir Putin's dictatorship could have been decisive.

The U.S. needs to lead. To coordinate with the EU is a guarantee that Moscow-friendly nations will keep sanctions more symbolic than substantive.

We are not optimistic that Biden will provide the spine in the West's battle for global democracy and punishing autocracy and kleptocracy.

The early signs are discouraging when one looks at the U.S. administration's response to the 2018 Jamal Khashoggi murder, the Kremlin's poisoning and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and, of primary interest to Ukraine, the German-Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

In all three cases, Biden appears content to speak loudly and carry a small stick.

He shows no appetite for sanctioning all firms and people involved in the construction of Nord Stream 2, whose completion marches on to the detriment of all except German and Austrian industrialists. Biden appears to be willing to let through the 55-billion-cubic-meter annual addition to the earlier Nord Stream 1 pipeline, in the name of solidarity with Berlin. While Trump did many things wrong, he rightly exposed the hypocrisy of Berlin's coziness with Moscow.

On the murder of Washington Post columnist Khashoggi, Biden did the right thing by releasing the intelligence concluding that de facto Saudi ruler Mohammad bin Salman is responsible. But the administration sanctioned subordinates, leaving MBS, as he is known, alone. There's no strategic or business reason strong enough to justify working with a nation led by a tyrant and a murderer. Leaving him unpunished means that heads of state will continue to get away with murder — and that's already playing itself out with war criminal Putin and genocidal dictator Xi Jinping.

With respect to the Navalny case, the US-EU and Kremlin go through the same charade over and over. Some individuals, sectors and companies are sanctioned, but no one too high and nothing too severe.

The West gets the headlines that make it look like it's tough, while the Kremlin expresses indignation and vows retaliation. Yet both sides mainly stick to business as usual.

Western leaders need to find the moral courage to slap on the heavy sanctions required to isolate the rogue Kremlin regime. When democracy rises around the globe, all other problems — including climate change, poverty, pandemics — will be easier to solve.

Oligarch TV

In a rule of law society that seeks freedom and pluralism in public information, there is no justification for allowing the same five oligarch groups to keep ruling the TV airwaves: Ihor Kolomoisky, Victor Pinchuk, Rinat Akhmetov, Dmytro Firtash-Serhiy Lyovochkin and Petro Poroshenko.

Into this poison also came Viktor Medvedchuk, until President Volodymyr Zelensky wisely on Feb. 2 pulled his three TV stations for acting as surrogates for the Kremlin.

A TV license grants permission to broadcast in the public interest, through the public airwaves, into homes. Or at least that should be the standard. Therefore, the license holders are rightly subject to government regulation.

While the same case for yanking the licenses cannot be made against all five groups, some are easier calls than others.

The first one is Kolomoisky. He should be criminally charged for multi-billion-dollar bank fraud, just as Ukraine has finally started to do with his former subordinates at PrivatBank. There's no moral justification for allowing such a person to control a media empire or any station.

Second on our list of easy calls is taking away the Inter TV license of Firtash-Lyovochkin. They behave practically as Russian agents, with Firtash's financial support from the Kremlin well-documented over the years. His monopolies needed to be busted up and his involvement in media needs to end for the same reasons as Medvedchuk: Threat to national security.

As for Pinchuk, the son-in-law of ex-President Leonid Kuchma should have never been allowed to acquire three television stations. His stations' past obstruction of an investigation into Kuchma's alleged role in ordering the murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze in 2000 should have been disqualifying. At the very least, he should be limited to owning one TV station.

This would be an effective start.

A TV industry free from Pinchuk, Firtash-Lyovochkin and Kolomoisky would be an improvement, perhaps serving as a warning sign for Poroshenko and Akhmetov.

While we prefer a stronger regulatory hand, we are encouraged that more Ukrainians are turning to internet rather than traditional TV for information. We need the revival of credible and financially sustainable journalism: A free internet where respectable news organizations can operate, combined with a robust public TV station, credible newspapers and magazines. That will at least dilute the malevolence of well-financed oligarch TV.



See these features online at kyivpost.com

Ukraine's Friend & Foe Of The Week



Charles Michel, European Council president
Michel visited the war zone in Donbas and pronounced: "There's no Europe without Ukraine." This is the kind of motivation and fighting spirit that Ukraine needs from the European Union. Now, if only sanctions on Russia could be tougher.



Igor Matovic, prime minister of Slovakia
The official apparently decided to try his hand at comedy and joked about his intention to trade the Russian vaccine Sputnik V for Ukraine's Transcarpathian Mountain region. After losing Crimea and part of the Donbas to Russia in 2014, no one in Ukraine thinks jokes about territorial loss are funny.

Feel strongly about an issue? Agree or disagree with editorial positions in this newspaper?

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Moscow divide strains Kyiv, Minsk relations



Vladislav Davidzon

Editor's Note: The following opinion was originally published by the Atlantic Council and is reprinted with the Washington, D.C.-based organization's permission.

The pro-democracy protest movement that erupted in Belarus last summer has unleashed a regional geopolitical shock wave. Since the crisis first began in August 2020, with President Alexander Lukashenko's falsified re-election, international attention has tended to focus on the challenges created for Russia and the European Union.

However, the Belarusian relationship with neighboring Ukraine has also come under strain. In many ways, the democratic awakening in Belarus has fractured and realigned the economic, military, diplomatic, and security relationship between Minsk and Kyiv.

Radically different

For years, bilateral ties between Ukraine and Belarus were shaped by the often radically different approaches adopted by the two nations towards managing their respective relationships with Moscow. Given the Kremlin's ambitions to maintain its dominant position within the post-Soviet region, the Russian factor has weighed heavily in both Minsk and Kyiv. The need to manage ties with Russia has in many ways defined Ukrainian-Belarusian engagement, creating an often antagonistic but mutually dependent relationship that continues to oscillate wildly.

Lukashenko has recently returned home from his latest summit meeting in Sochi, during which he pleaded for additional assistance from Russian President Vladimir Putin. The visit in turn sparked the latest round of speculation over Lukashenko's readiness to accept Russian demands for deeper integration. As the Western world grows ever more distant with every act of repression from his security services, the Belarus dictator appears to have little option but to accept greater Russian dominance in return for desperately needed support.

Ukraine sides with EU

Meanwhile, the deterioration in diplomatic relations between Belarus and Ukraine began in the early days of the crisis last summer. In line with broader international opinion, Ukraine declined to recognize the official results of the flawed August 2020 Belarusian presidential election.

This sparked an indignant response from Lukashenko, who accused Kyiv of having sided with the West against him.

As the crisis escalated, Lukashenko repeatedly claimed Ukraine was part of an insidious plot against him masterminded by NATO, the Poles, the Lithuanians, and the Western world

in general. Bilateral relations deteriorated rapidly as a consequence.

Tensions with Ukraine continued to simmer throughout the final months of 2020. The Lukashenko regime was furious over Kyiv's moral support for the Belarusian pro-democracy movement and the Ukrainian government's apparent readiness to help Belarusian dissidents. Many suspected that Lukashenko's vocal criticism of Ukraine was also designed to win favor in Moscow.

Poaching IT talent

There was considerable anger within the Lukashenko regime at Ukraine's decision to extend a red-carpet welcome to Belarusian tech companies and IT professionals looking to relocate from Minsk.

However, the breakdown in bilateral ties remained far from complete, with Ukraine continuing to discreetly purchase electricity from Belarus.

There were indications that the war of words between the Ukrainian and Belarusian foreign ministries was beginning to cool off by the end of year. Some Belarusian analysts have since hinted that Minsk may not have been taking the confrontation very seriously, despite the strong language employed.

"Relations still exist but it would perhaps be better if both foreign ministries took a very deep breath and a long pause," says Denis Bukonkin, director of the Foreign Policy and Security Research Center. "From the Belarus perspective, it looks as if the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is leaning toward EU policy and is obliged to take the same positions as the EU."

Minsk placates Moscow

While Kyiv has more or less openly backed the Belarusian pro-democracy protest movement, the leadership of the Belarusian opposition has not entirely returned the favor. With a view to keeping a window open for future conversations with Moscow, Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has been cautious about adopting pro-Ukrainian positions on key geopolitical issues such as the 2014 Russian seizure of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula.

"The Belarusian opposition has maintained its distance from Kyiv," explains Andrei Kazakevich, director of Political Studies at the Political Sphere think tank. "Tsikhanouskaya's refusal to make a clear statement on the question of Crimea has kept the Ukrainians from further developing relations with the Belarusian opposition leadership in exile."

The rise in bilateral tensions between Kyiv and Minsk over the



A drone carries a white-red-white flag above Kyiv during a rally supporting International Solidarity Day With Belarus in the center of Kyiv on Feb. 7, 2021.

past seven months follows on from a period of intensified engagement dating back to the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine in early 2014. The outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine placed Belarus in an extremely delicate position.

Since 2014, the Belarus strongman had sought to play both sides off against one another, while at the same time resolutely taking the Russian side during important votes in international bodies. Belarus was one of only 11 nations to vote against Ukrainian territorial integrity at the United Nations on March 27, 2014, following the Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea. Minsk would also go on to take Moscow's side during subsequent United Nations votes pertaining to territorial integrity issues as well as human rights abuses committed against the Crimean Tatars.

Seeking middle ground

Despite this support for Moscow on the global stage, the Belarusian strongman has sought to occupy the middle ground whenever possible. Crucially, he has offered Ukraine iron clad guarantees of neutrality and pledged to prevent Russian troops or proxies from posing a threat to Ukraine's northern borders from Belarusian territory. Ukraine and Belarus share a border of over 1,000 kilometers. Any Russian military pressure from the north would totally redefine the current conflict and would force Ukraine to radically rethink the country's entire defense posture. In this context, Lukashenko's repeated jokes about arriving at the Ukrainian border on a tractor rather than a tank have been part of his efforts to calm nerves in Kyiv.

Faced by the overwhelming might of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine have had good reason to develop security cooperation in recent years. Prior to the current crisis in Belarus, Kyiv and Minsk regularly exchanged intel-

ligence reports and other sensitive information.

No more Minsk talks?

Beginning in September 2014, a key aspect of Belarus-Ukraine ties has been the role of Minsk as the location for peace negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv.

However, the new geopolitical realities created by Lukashenko's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations have served to undo any advantages accrued as a result of the Minsk peace process. With Lukashenko isolated from the West and reliant on Russia, the entire future of the Minsk negotiation format has been thrown into question. It is now obvious that the Ukrainian delegation no longer regards Minsk as a neutral venue, while human rights concerns also make Lukashenko an entirely unsuitable host from a European point of view.

"The situation with Minsk remaining the negotiating platform for further contacts between Kyiv and Moscow has not been fully resolved, even though it is obvious that the Belarusian capital can no longer serve as the location for neutral talks under these circumstances," says Yauheni Priherman, director at the Minsk Dialogue on International Relations. "I am not entirely sure that this is a settled matter as Ukraine is insisting on changing the location of future negotiations, but the Europeans have no idea what to do about the issue. It does not look like any decision will be made anytime soon."

With Lukashenko more and more dependent on Russia, Moscow continues to explore opportunities to increase military pressure on Ukraine and the EU via Belarus. Lukashenko has long resisted Russian efforts to establish permanent military bases on Belarusian territory, but the Kremlin already manages two strategic facilities in Belarus.

Military pressure


One is a long-range submarine communications hub, while the other is an anti-rocket radar facility. The real issue is whether the Kremlin will prove able to acquire a further military foothold. Putin has long set his sights on a Russian air base in Belarus, which Lukashenko has always seen as unacceptable. However, this may be part of the terms and conditions for continued Russian backing. For obvious reasons, any increase in the Russian military presence in Belarus would be viewed with extreme alarm by Ukraine.

The military component is just one aspect of the complex relationship between Kyiv and Minsk. Ukraine's desire to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration and Belarus's focus on closer ties with Moscow have placed the two countries on sharply diverging geopolitical trajectories, but a shared desire to manage Russian imperial ambitions has also created considerable common ground.

The pro-democracy uprising of the past seven months in Belarus has served to further complicate bilateral ties and fueled increasingly public tensions in what has traditionally been a diplomatically courteous and outwardly friendly relationship.

With hopes fading for a rapid conclusion to the pro-democracy uprising in Belarus, both Kyiv and Minsk now appear to be looking to dial down the diplomatic belligerence of late 2020 and settle into a new period of comparative calm.

Tellingly, Lukashenko has recently ceased including Ukrainians in the paranoid pantheon of his imagined enemies. During his 26-year reign, he has learned to avoid turning opponents into mortal enemies. He may now be seeking to adopt a similarly pragmatic approach towards future relations with Ukraine.

Vladislav Davidzon is a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. 

5 guys still rule the roost when it comes to Ukrainian television

By Oleksiy Sorokin
sorokin@kyivpost.com

In early February, President Volodymyr Zelensky shut down three pro-Kremlin TV channels. The bold move was praised by activists, journalists, and pro-Western observers.

However, when the dust from the attack settled, Ukrainian TV remained what it was: not free.

Ukraine's top 10 TV channels serve as political tools for a handful of oligarchs. They directly influence their channels' agenda, giving air-time to friendly politicians, while muting and lambasting those who threaten their interests.

Moreover, the pro-Kremlin agenda didn't disappear from the air.

Narratives and lies similar to the ones aired on the three channels that were shut down are still promoted on the news-and-views station Nash, reportedly linked to Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, as well as on Inter, a major channel owned by lawmaker Serhiy Lyovochkin and fugitive Kremlin-backed oligarch Dmytro Firtash.

Other top channels promote the agendas of oligarchs Ihor Kolomoisky, Rinat Akhmetov, Victor Pinchuk and ex-President Petro Poroshenko. Deeply unprofitable, the channels survive only on cash provided by their wealthy owners — who in turn control their coverage.

Together, five oligarchs control nearly 70% of Ukrainian television. While he shut down three pro-Kremlin stations, Zelensky has



Lawmakers with pro-Kremlin Opposition Platform — For Life Serhiy Lyovochkin (L), Viktor Medvedchuk (C) and Vadym Rabinovych speak in the parliament session hall on Feb. 16, 2020. Medvedchuk's three TV channels — ZIK, NewsOne and Channel 112 — have been shut down by President Volodymyr Zelensky. Channels owned by Lyovochkin remain on air.

never acted on his campaign promise to limit oligarchs' influence on their TV channels.

Kremlin-friendly network

In the past several years, the loudest voice on Ukrainian TV was the voice of Russian propaganda.

On several channels, Kremlin-friendly TV hosts were mulling public opinion to think that Ukraine is entrenched in a civil war and promoting anti-Western conspiracies.

As a result, the pro-Kremlin Opposition Platform — For Life party that holds 44 seats in parliament gained first place in the January polls. It was the first time an openly pro-Russian party led the polls since the EuroMaidan Revolution ousted Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

The man behind the revival was Viktor Medvedchuk, a friend of Vladimir Putin and former head of Leonid Kuchma's presidential

administration.

Returning to the national stage after a decade in the shadow, Medvedchuk consolidated fractured Kremlin sympathizers and took control of three news TV channels formally owned by his associate Taras Kozak — Channel 112, NewsOne, and ZIK.

Medvedchuk is no stranger to abusing freedom of speech. It was during his tenure that Kuchma's office started sending written instructions to the media about the coverage it wanted. Those instructions were known as "temniki."

The three-channel group acted like one, promoting the Kremlin's agenda.

In 2018, parliament voted to impose sanctions against pro-Kremlin media, primarily those controlled by Medvedchuk.

However, the National Security and Defense Council never acted on the parliament's request. According to the transcript of the council's meeting obtained by the Kyiv Post, Poroshenko personally withheld sanctions against Medvedchuk's media from the agenda, saying that the decision needs more work.

Anatoly Otkysiuk, a political expert at local think tank Democracy House, says that Poroshenko was deliberately nurturing Medvedchuk and his pro-Kremlin allies to face a comfortable opponent during future elections.

"Poroshenko knew that Medvedchuk isn't an actual threat to him, rather a convenient embodiment of evil," Otkysiuk told the Kyiv Post.

As a result, during the 2019 parliament elections, Medvedchuk's pro-Kremlin party gained second place, reviving him as a nationwide politician.

In February, when the National Security and Defense Council imposed sanctions against pro-Kremlin lawmakers and their vast businesses and media, Medvedchuk's three TV channels were among the

most-watched news channels in Ukraine with nearly 4% of the total viewership.

After the sanctions, they continued to go live on YouTube. Their one attempt to return to broadcasting — by acquiring a small TV station and rebranding it — failed. One hour after it went live on Feb. 26, the station was taken off the air.

The channels also filed several complaints about the sanctions to the Supreme Court. There has been no decision yet.

Russian sympathizers

Even without Medvedchuk's channels, pro-Kremlin propaganda isn't gone. TV channels Inter and Nash continue spreading anti-Western narratives.

Inter is one of Ukraine's oldest TV channels. It is in the top 5 most-watched channels and has a bigger audience than Medvedchuk's three channels combined.

Inter is owned by Firtash, a Ukrainian energy and chemical tycoon, who lives in exile in Vienna. Firtash has been fighting extradition to the United States since his arrest in 2014 on bribery charges that he denies.

Pro-Russian lawmaker Lyovochkin also owns a share. His ally, lawmaker Yuriy Boyko, the most popular pro-Russian politician in Ukraine, has a regular presence in news segments, talk shows, and commercials.

However, Inter has toned down its pro-Russian propaganda after Zelensky imposed sanctions against Medvedchuk's media, according to Otar Dovzhenko, an observer at the Detector Media watchdog.

"Firtash-Lyovochkin's group understood the hint," said Dovzhenko.

Another channel, Nash, didn't. Although it has a small audience, it is now the most heavily pro-Kremlin channel in Ukraine.

Pro-Russian lawmaker Yevhen Muraev created Nash after a fallout with Medvedchuk.

Before Kozak-Medvedchuk's sanctions were shut down, Nash had just 0.38% share of the TV audience in January.

After sanctions, Nash became one of the most-watched news channels in Ukraine with over 1.5% of the viewership.

Despite a very similar agenda, Nash avoided sanctions and this didn't pass unnoticed. One of the first to bring attention to the fact was ex-President Poroshenko.

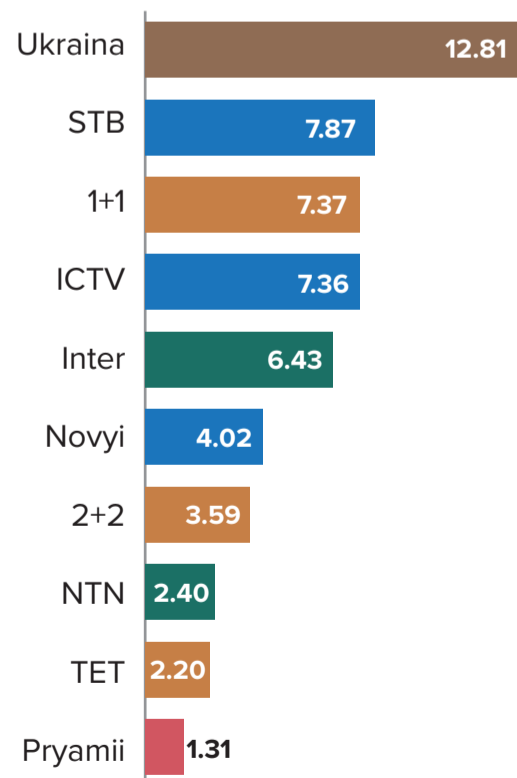
Nash could have been placed under sanctions together with Medvedchuk's channels in 2018, by the Security Council. But, just like Poroshenko saved Medvedchuk's channels by taking them off the agenda Avakov asked for Nash to be withdrawn at the same meeting.

According to the transcript, Avakov said that Nash was affiliated with Akhmetov. Withdrawing Medvedchuk's channels but sanctioning Akhmetov's would be seen as taking sides, he said at the meeting.

There is no official connection

Top 10 Channels, 2021

Accumulated viewership %, among viewers over 18 years old

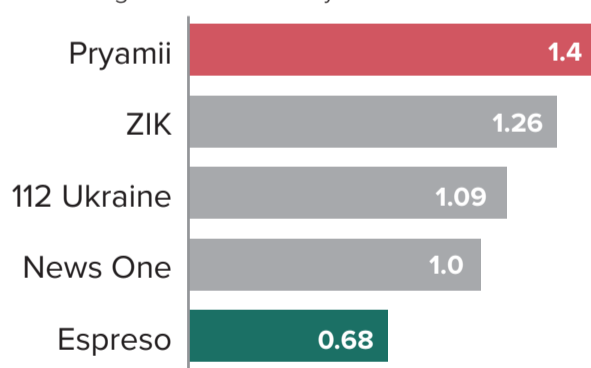


*Three TV channels linked to Viktor Medvedchuk - ZIK, NewsOne, Channel 112 - were shut down on Feb. 3 because of sanctions imposed by President Volodymyr Zelensky. In 2020, all three were among the top 5 most watched news channels in Ukraine, having a strong influence on public opinion.

Source: Vizeum Ukraine

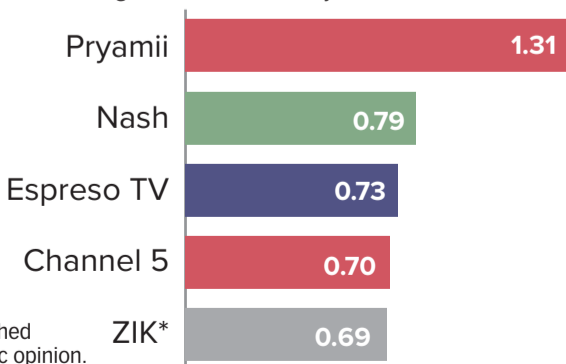
Top 5 News Channels, 2020

Accumulated viewership %, among viewers over 18 years old



Top 5 News Channels, 2021

Accumulated viewership %, among viewers over 18 years old



The ownership and control over Ukraine's major TV stations are highly concentrated among a handful of oligarchs who also have major interests in the leading sectors of Ukraine's economy. This has long been a source of concern in Ukraine. The news TV stations, in particular, are used as propaganda outlets promoting their owners' political and private interests.

TV stations guard the interests of oligarchs

page 6 →

between Nash and Akhmetov or Avakov.

Poroshenko cheerleading

When running for president in 2014, Poroshenko said he would sell his Channel 5, which he owned since 2004. He not only didn't do that, but he acquired another TV channel, Pryamii.

Together, the two stations today have just a 2% of the general viewership, but Pryamii is among the most watched news-and-views channels.

Although Pryamii was launched in 2017, Poroshenko has always denied owning it, despite obvious links and heavily pro-Poroshenko coverage.

In February, after Medvedchuk's channels were shut down, Poroshenko said that he bought Pryamii from its official owner Volodymyr Makeenko to save it from possible sanctions. His claim didn't make legal sense because Poroshenko's status as a lawmaker doesn't protect his media from sanctions.

On Pryamii, Poroshenko continues his tactic of conveniently juxtaposing himself against a pro-Russian opponent. Two politicians that often appear on Pryamii are Poroshenko and Boyko.

Top speakers on Pryamii are usually lawmakers from Poroshenko's European Solidarity party, while news segments begin by talking about Poroshenko's charitable work or statements he published on Facebook or Twitter.

Coverage on Channel 5 is similar. On Valentine's Day, it aired a flattering interview with Poroshenko and his wife.

Both channels relentlessly criticize Zelensky and his government.

Akhmetov & Kolomoisky

Akhmetov's Ukraina and Kolomoisky's 1+1 are the most popular TV channels in Ukraine with 12.8% and 7.4% of viewership as of March.

Both channels have diverse programming – from Ukrainian soap operas and American movies to news segments and political talk shows. During news segments and talk shows, each channel promotes the owner's agenda and gives airtime to politicians favored by the owner.

Dovzhenko said that owners use their TV channels in several ways. On one hand, they can whitewash their name and promote their business in the eyes of the government, politicians, and competitors. On the other, the channels are used to influence public opinion and sell that service to politicians.

"This part of the channel's activity is usually important before elections when certain political parties need to be promoted," said Dovzhenko.

The most recent example could be seen during the October local elections.

Akhmetov's Ukraina TV channel was actively promoting Opposition Bloc, a less popular pro-Russian party tied to Akhmetov. The main speakers were party leader lawmaker Vadym Novinsky and politician Borys Kolesnikov. Both are

Oligarchs' control over TV



Source: Vizeum Ukraine

Ukrainian oligarchs Rinat Akhmetov, Victor Pinchuk, Ihor Kolomoisky, Petro Poroshenko, Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Lyovochkin control the nation's major television stations and media empires. Viktor Medvedchuk was in the club until Feb. 2, when President Volodymyr Zelensky ordered Medvedchuk's three TV stations off the air as a national security risk for their Kremlin propaganda.



Pryamii TV channel airs a speech of channel owner ex-President Petro Poroshenko on Feb. 18, 2021.

Akhmetov's business partners. It didn't help – the party performed poorly in the elections.

Akhmetov's media also promoted two populist oligarch-friendly politicians: Oleh Lyashko, leader of the Radical Party, and Yulia Tymoshenko, leader of the 24-member Batkivshchyna faction in parliament.

In 2020, Akhmetov launched news-and-views channel Ukraina 24. It's not clear how much it grew his influence on the audience: the new channel doesn't reveal viewership data.

On both Ukraina and Ukraina 24, neutral news segments blend in with those that promote Akhmetov-friendly politicians or the oligarch's charity work. Ukraina 24's hosts, recruited from pro-Kremlin channels, interview Lyashko about how importing cheap electricity is bad for Ukraine. Akhmetov's DTEK is the largest electricity producer in Ukraine and lobbies against electricity imports.

It is similar to channels owned by the other heavyweight oligarch, Kolomoisky.

His channels backed Zelensky and his party during the 2019 elections but since then the relationship went sour.

Zelensky supported the anti-Kolomoisky bank law and, most recently, excluded Kolomoisky's associate Oleksandr Dubinsky from his Servant of the People parliament faction.

As a result, Kolomoisky's channel has focused on promoting the oligarch's new project – For the Future,

ing by-elections in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast. Shevchenko ran the Bukovel ski resort when Kolomoisky owned it.

After the Kolomoisky-Zelensky relationship cooled, members of Zelensky's administration and party have migrated from Kolomoisky's 1+1 channel to Akhmetov's Ukraina 24. Speaker Dmytro Razumkov, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal and Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak have all given lengthy interviews on Ukraina 24 in the past several months.

Lower-profile Pinchuk

The less political, yet influential oligarch Victor Pinchuk has the largest share of Ukrainian TV.

His three channels – ICTV, STB and Novyi Kanal – have 18% of Ukraine's TV viewership.

Pinchuk, the son-in-law of Kuchma, who ruled from 1994–2005, is notorious for remaining on good footing with Ukrainian political elites.

His stance on Russia's war against Ukraine has come under criticism.

While Pinchuk acknowledges that Russia invaded Ukraine and occupied Crimea, he advocated for letting Crimea go in return for peace in eastern Ukraine. His metallurgical company Interpipe sells its produce to Russia.

His channels tend to follow a similar line.

"For the last 15 years, Pinchuk's channels have been loyal to any government if it doesn't attack Pinchuk and does not touch his father-in-law Kuchma," Dovzhenko told the Kyiv Post.

A notable exception is Medvedchuk's Opposition Platform which is unofficially banned from Pinchuk's TV.

Overall, Dovzhenko says "there is no 'magic pill' that would de-oligarchize the media."

"The oligarchic media will not stop praising their owners and their business, but at least there is a chance that they will stop throwing information 'dirty bombs' at the society," he adds.

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Zelensky aims to be president who ends Ukraine's oligarchy



Iuliia Mendel

Editor's Note: The following opinion was originally published by the Atlantic Council and is reprinted with the Washington, D.C.-based organization's permission.

Less than two years ago, Volodymyr Zelensky was elected as Ukraine's sixth president with an overwhelming mandate to transform the country. First and foremost, this meant ending almost thirty years of oligarch domination that had left Ukraine mired in poverty and corruption. Zelensky is now making good on his election promises and combating oligarch influence in ways that eluded his predecessors.

The rise of Ukraine's oligarch class dates back to the early 1990s, when a select few were able to acquire enormous wealth during the privatizations that followed the collapse of the USSR. This small group of billionaires then used their personal fortunes to build media empires and establish networks of influence extending deep into Ukraine's political structures, judiciary, and state organs. They have remained in this dominant position ever since.

Ukraine's oligarchic system has proven highly resilient, outliving numerous governments and coming through the turbulence of two separate post-Soviet revolutions more or less intact. Each successive drive to change the system has resulted in innovative new ways to maintain the unfair advantages and artificial monopolies that form the foundation stones of the oligarchic economic system. The overwhelming might of the oligarchs has kept Ukraine trapped in an obsolete and dysfunctional past while preventing

the country from reaching its true potential.

This was the political environment inherited by Volodymyr Zelensky in spring 2019. As a successful businessman in his own right who had emerged from the regions to establish himself in the oligarch-dominated Ukrainian media industry, Zelensky was personally familiar with the realities of the situation. His status as a political outsider, along with his track record for accurately portraying the problems created by Ukraine's oligarchs, were key factors behind his landslide election victory. In recent months, Zelensky's team has initiated a number of steps that indicate a readiness to reduce oligarch influence.

Firtash scandal

One of the biggest scandals to rock Ukraine in early 2021 was closely associated with oligarch Dmitry Firtash. The controversy revolved around sharp rises in gas tariffs for Ukrainian households. These price increases were connected to recently launched gas market reforms and sparked protests across the country. As the dominant figure in the domestic gas market responsible for supplies to around 88% of all residential users, Firtash stood to make a fortune from higher tariffs.

It was clear that the attempt to create a residential gas market had been poorly executed, with Ukrainian households unable to easily switch suppliers. Instead, millions found themselves hostage to price hikes.



President Volodymyr Zelensky gives a speech at the "Ukraine 30. Coronavirus: Challenges and Responses" forum, kicking off a series of 30 forums organized by the President's Office.

Once again, we were reminded of why so many Ukrainians remain deeply skeptical about the ability of reforms to transform their lives for the better.

In response to the gas price crisis, the Zelensky administration opted to temporarily resume state regulation of energy market prices. Meanwhile, communication initiatives were launched to better inform the Ukrainian public on how to switch from one gas supplier to another. Within one week, regional gas companies were complaining about massive outflows of customers in excess of 10,000 per day. In order to win back these clients, the current gas suppliers controlled by oligarch interests must compete with new market entrants.

Dismantling schemes

This is just one example of the Zelensky administration's commitment to dismantling the schemes and structures that perpetuate oligarchic control over the Ukrainian economy. President Zelensky is all too aware that many Ukrainians have seen little material benefit from the numerous reforms initiated since 2014. He knows that in order to live up to his billing as a transformative figure in Ukrainian history, he must demonstrate the political will to conduct genuine reforms that undermine the dominance of the oligarchs.

Taking on Medvedchuk

Nothing illustrates Zelensky's will to counter oligarch influence quite as clearly as the series of recent measures adopted in relation to Viktor Medvedchuk. Ever since the 1990s, Medvedchuk has been a hugely influential figure in the worlds of Ukrainian business and politics. A personal friend of Vladimir Putin who counts the Russian president as godfather to his daughter, Medvedchuk has openly promoted the Kremlin agenda in Ukraine for years.

Despite the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, Medvedchuk was able to continue operating with the same sense of almost complete impunity enjoyed by his fellow Ukrainian oligarchs. This finally changed in February 2021 when the National Security and Defense Council ruled to ban three pro-Kremlin Ukrainian TV channels linked to Medvedchuk. The decision to ban these channels was a difficult one given Ukraine's commitment to democratic values and freedom of expression. However, the national security implications were simply too serious to allow the situation to continue.

Clear signal

In the weeks following the TV chan-

nel bans, Ukraine also imposed a range of personal sanctions against Medvedchuk and his wife. The message was crystal clear. Not only was Zelensky refusing to cut deals with Medvedchuk in the manner of previous Ukrainian presidents, but he was also sending an unambiguous signal to Russia that Ukraine finally had a strong leader who would bite back if attacked.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials announced in late February that three former top managers at the country's biggest bank, PrivatBank, are now suspects in a \$5.5 billion fraud case at the heart of Ukraine's oligarch politics. One of these suspects was detained while attempting to leave the country. The news generated considerable international attention and was widely seen as an indication that the high-profile investigation may finally be gaining momentum.

"The case is a litmus test of President Volodymyr Zelensky's willingness to crack down on corruption that has dogged the ex-Soviet republic since the fall of communism. PrivatBank's previous owners, tycoons Igor Kolomoisky and Gennady Bogolyubov, are fighting legal efforts by the government to recoup bailout cash in several jurisdictions," noted Bloomberg.

The PrivatBank case has long served as a symbol of oligarch impunity. Progress towards justice would be seen as a major breakthrough for Ukraine.

As events in recent weeks have shown, Zelensky is prepared to challenge the power of Ukraine's oligarchs everywhere from the energy and banking sectors to politics and the media. Previous Ukrainian leaders have said much about deoligarchization but done little. Zelensky aims to let his actions speak for themselves.

Iuliia Mendel is the spokesperson for President Volodymyr Zelensky.

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Ukraine's military acquisition in limbo as officials slow at enforcing amendments

page 2 —>

only sent in for review in mid-December to the despair of watchdogs.

Facing a torrent of criticism, Minister for Strategic Industries Oleh Uruskiy in his late December interview with the Kyiv Post vowed to get all the job done by mid-February.

But the bill is still not working.

Corruption risks

The defense and strategic industries ministries point out that the bylaws are being submitted and approved little by little, and that the new procurement system will be completed.

On March 3, Uruskiy reported passing two more bylaws. Strategic Industries Ministry spokesman Anton Mikhnenko said that eight out of ten documents required from the Ministry of Strategic Industries have been reviewed and adopted by the government.

The Defense Ministry told Radio

Free Europe/Radio Liberty that the Defense Ministry has also submitted all six of its bylaws for review.

Mikhnenko did not respond to Kyiv Post's questions about why his ministry was taking so long.

Even though the government keeps passing new regulations, new problems keep cropping up.

On Feb. 11, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention said that bylaws approved by the Cabinet of Ministers have high corruption risks and loopholes, allowing officials to confer advantages to select companies in open tenders.

In an open letter published Feb. 24, nine of the biggest anti-graft nonprofits issued a joint statement accusing the government of trying to derail the reform.

"The draft acts developed by the Cabinet of Ministers partially contradict the bill and preserve the status quo," the experts said. "Excessive secrecy, lack of competition and



A Ukrainian soldier stands guard at a combat post in the war zone of the Donbas on Feb. 19, 2021.

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manufacturers' transparent access, no market pricing, no transparent and progressive model for the assessment of profits of monopolistic enterprises."

The bylaws threaten the reform with complete failure, according to the letter.

According to Arthur Pereverziev, a Defense Ministry reform advisor in 2015–2020, the most basic problem behind the defense procurement bylaws is not that they are behind schedule, but the very reason the deadlines were missed.

"(It's because of) the lack of specialists able to write correctly and qualitatively and the surplus of those

who write incorrectly, aiming to change nothing," the expert said. "From a distance, it is hard to see if this is a deliberate policy to derail the reform in favor of status quo or simply incompetent management of the country's strategic industries."

Meanwhile, as the transition deadline is drawing near, the defense procurement sector is facing critical uncertainty in light of the upcoming legislative void.

Many officials are confused about how to interact with defense contractors because "any time, law enforcement can come in and charge them with misuse of authority in the distribution of state budget money,"

Kanievskiy said.

As analysts note, while the government procrastinates with bylaws, the military needs an uninterrupted supply chain and can't wait for anyone.

Now that all the deadlines have been missed, the Cabinet of Ministers is rushing to pass the bylaws as quickly as possible, just to pull its reputation out of a death dive.

"This means that we will likely not get a new defense procurement system working in 2021," Kanievskiy said. "The government will sooner or later admit that numerous amendments need to be worked out, just to whip the regulation into shape – as it often happens." ❄️

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Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny stands inside a glass cell during a court hearing at the Babushkinsky district court in Moscow on Feb. 20, 2021. Navalny was sentenced to nearly three years in prison. He is considered to be a political prisoner for his opposition to President Vladimir Putin.

AFP

Biden takes it slow with sanctions against Russia

By Anna Myroniuk
myroniuk@kyivpost.com

Political watchdogs are lukewarm about sanctions recently imposed against Russia by the United States.

Some deemed the sanctions too lenient. Others said that U.S. President Joe Biden just needs more time to strike harder.

"Let's give the Biden administration a bit more time, please. Thank God (U.S. President Donald J.) Trump is gone, and to remove the damage he did will take years," said Roland Freudenstein, policy director at Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies.

Regardless, the moves — tepid or not — send a signal to Russia that the U.S. will respond to the Kremlin's totalitarian actions at home and abroad. Experts believe that even if the sanctions don't cause strong economic damage to Russia, they will have a political impact. The Russian Foreign Ministry has already called the sanctions "a hostile move."

"Sanctions rarely change someone else's behavior by 180 degrees," Freudenstein told the Kyiv Post.

Axel Schmidt/Nord Stream 2



The Nord Stream 2 pipeline under construction by vessel Pioneering Spirit on Feb. 25, 2019. The \$11 billion pipeline, which goes under the Baltic Sea to double the amount of natural gas transported annually from Russia to Europe to 110 billion cubic meters, has been under construction since 2015. For now, much of Russian gas goes to Europe through Ukraine's land-based gas transit system.

"But without sanctions against Russia in 2014, Mariupol would not be a free city anymore," he said of Russia's military aggression in eastern Ukraine. "Putin then wanted his forces to push on. He stopped them because of the sanctions, and the threat of more sanctions to come. That's already something."

On March 2, the U.S. slapped sanctions against senior Russian officials and institutions, accusing them of poisoning Alexei Navalny, the most fierce critic of Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

Last August, the FSB tried to assassinate Navalny by putting a nerve agent in his underwear. The opposition leader spent months recovering in a German hospital. When he returned to Russia, law enforcement threw him in prison for allegedly missing a court appearance while he laid unconscious.

When they announced the latest sanctions, White House officials told Russia to release Navalny.

The U.S. sanctions target seven senior Russian officials including Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov,

3 cases: Nord Stream, Alexei Navalny, Jamal Khashoggi

page 10 —>

Federal Security Service Chief Aleksandr Bortnikov and Federal Penitentiary Service director Aleksander Kalashnikov.

Their American property has been blocked, as have all their businesses anywhere in the world. American citizens are banned from financially interacting with them.

The U.S. worked with the European Union. Brussels' sanctions target practically the same people. The EU imposed travel bans and froze their assets. The United Kingdom also joined in with visa bans and asset freezes.

But sanctioning individuals is not the end of it.

Both the EU and the U.K. also froze the assets of Russia's State Scientific Research Institute for Organic Chemistry and Technology.

The U.S. penalties are even broader. They hit 13 Russian companies as well as the FSB and the institutes producing biological and chemical agents.

In the new sanction package, the State Department expanded on the existing Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act sanctions that had been imposed after Russia poisoned ex-spy Sergey Skripal in the U.K. in 2018.

Oleksandr Krayev, an expert with the Ukrainian Prism nonprofit analytical center, says sanctions against research institutions are a strong response to the Russian use of nerve agents against political opponents.

"It is important to note that Russia is technically lagging behind the Western world despite creating

an image that it does not rely on imported technologies," Krayev said. "Blocking technological cooperation with the U.S. is a significant step."

"This is a signal not only for American companies but to the entire world that Russian science in the field of chemical development should not be cooperated with," Krayev said.

Obama-like sanctions?

Still, after the sanctions came into force on March 2, some political experts criticized Biden for way too soft a punch.

One reason is that there were no new sanctions against the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline Russia built to send gas to Germany, bypassing Ukraine, though which Russia used to send gas to Europe for decades. The U.S. believes this would increase Europe's energy dependence on Russia.

The most recent sanctions against Nord Stream 2 were approved by the U.S. Congress in December as part of a major defense spending bill.

Timothy Ash, a London-based emerging markets strategist, called the latest sanctions a "total joke."

"The Biden administration sends a poor signal to Moscow from the start that it is not willing to bear the cost of countering Russian aggression," he said in an emailed comment and added: "The West has to learn that we have to be prepared to accept there is a price for countering Russian aggression."

Ash said that economically, the sanctions caused little, if any damage. "Markets will view this with relief," he said. The ruble strengthened on the



Friends of murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi hold placards with his picture as they attend an event to mark the second-year anniversary of his assassination in front of Saudi Arabia Istanbul Consulate on Oct. 2, 2020. Khashoggi, a Washington Post columnist, was killed and dismembered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on Oct. 2, 2018.

news about the sanctions.

"These new sanctions will have hardly any economic impact," agreed Anders Aslund, a Swedish economist and a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"But more sanctions on oligarchs and finance are likely to come and they will have more impact," he told the Kyiv Post.

In late January, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation emailed Washington's top officials, calling on them to include 35 oligarchs and Putin associates in the sanctions list.

The Biden administration did not acquiesce. Aslund believes this will happen, but later.

"In order to sanction oligarchs, more time to check their finances is required, to avoid a repetition of the debacle with Oleg Deripaska, whose Rusal turned out to be too big to sanction," Aslund said of the Russian oligarch close to Putin whom the U.S. sanctioned in 2018.

The Trump administration lifted sanctions against three of his major companies a year later.

"More is likely to come," the economist said.

More to come

The Biden administration announced

that this was only the first step and more sanctions are coming.

Krayev says that Ukraine should not be offended by the fact that the U.S. did not extend the sanctions against Nord Stream 2. According to him, there are reasons to believe that the next set of sanctions will hit the Russian pipeline.

"The U.S. has not yet imposed new sanctions against Nord Stream 2, because they are waiting for elections in Germany. Clearly, Germany is the only influential ally of the U.S. standing for Nord Stream 2. And we understand why," Krayev said of Germany, which would benefit from the 90%-completed pipeline economically.

Germany's September 2021 elections are when the new round of sanctions can come into play. "If the opponents of Nord Stream win, it is likely that the sanctions will not even be needed. And the Americans always have this ace up their sleeve," Krayev said.

Aslund believes more actions against the pipeline are likely.

"The Biden administration opposes Nord Stream 2, but my understanding is that they want to talk to the Germans before they impose more sanctions. There is time because with

current equipment it would take the Russians more than a year to complete Nord Stream 2," he said.

"I don't think that Nord Stream 2 will be completed," Aslund added.

The Biden administration also faced criticism for not sanctioning Russia's sovereign debt, and deciding against punishing the Saudi Arabian crown prince for ordering the 2018 murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

This is just the beginning, the experts told the Kyiv Post.

"The Biden administration has promised a review of its sanctions policy on Russia, not to soften it but to make it more effective. That takes some time," said Aslund.

What deserves the greatest attention is that the U.S., the EU, and the U.K. aligned in a transnational effort to show Russia that they are ready to strike against, Freudenstein believes.

"The most important fact about the new sanctions is that the EU and US enacted them together," he said.

"This is not the end. As the Kremlin becomes more aggressive abroad (and more totalitarian at home) new sanctions, this time including oligarchs, are a question of time." 🇺🇸



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Crimean Tatar fashion offers a cultural breakout

Oleg Petrasluk



Models wear pieces from the "Oyma" collection by designer Polina Veller at the Ukrainian Fashion Week in Kyiv on Feb. 7, 2021. Born under the impression from the traditional Crimean Tatar carving technique oyma, the collection pushed the boundaries of the conservative culture of Crimea's indigenous people.

By Elina Kent
kent@kyivpost.com

Garments from the new collection by Ukrainian designer Polina Veller are unlikely to be spotted on local fashionistas.

But the intricate plastic corsets, carved masks and 20-centimeter-tall wooden shoes weren't designed for practicality.

Inspired by Crimean Tatar culture, the pieces were crafted to remind society of the Russian-occupied Crimea and expose the aesthetics of the peninsula's indigenous people.

"I am making our fashion community appreciate Crimea and give it further light," Veller told the Kyiv Post.

The "Oyma" collection, named after the traditional Crimean Tatar carving technique, was presented at the Ukrainian Fashion Week on Feb. 7.

Running with no physical audience and broadcasting pre-recorded

shows online, the industry's main event made designers push their creativity to innovate and adapt to the new climate the coronavirus pandemic has created.

In an unintended turn, Veller not only pushed her own creativity but the cultural boundaries within the highly-conservative Muslim community of the Crimean Tatar people.

Remembering Crimea

Veller has a long history of creating conceptual projects. Her previous works have included a collection showcasing decommunization, where she supported Soviet artists but not Soviet symbols. Her earlier collections explored her Ukrainian roots through ethnic Ukrainian designs.

The message of the "Oyma" collection was remembering Crimea that had been annexed by Russia seven years ago.

The designer was born in Ukraine, but her father comes from the peninsula, so Veller feels a deep connec-

tion to Crimea.

An artist himself, her father too would break boundaries and wear skirts in his youth. "That's where I get it from," Veller says.

Though she has no direct relation to Crimean Tatars, the designer created the aesthetic of the collection under the impression of the oyma technique, recognizing and giving tribute to the ancient Crimean Tatar artistry and production.

To make sure her pieces pay no disrespect to the culture they originated from, Veller teamed up with Crimean Tatar artist Rustem Skybin.

A pottery artist and a cultural and historic consultant, Skybin designed traditional ornaments for "Oyma."

Together the two wanted to remind the collection's audience of the occupation.

"Our message visually and psychologically, was that we are thinking of Crimea. We are worried," Skybin told the Kyiv Post.

Modern twist

Veller kept traditional aspects of Crimean Tatar design such as the cylindrical peakless fez hats the models wore and the sleeves that hugged their wrists.

The shoes were also historic pieces: Traditionally worn by Crimean Tatars during bad weather or at the bathhouse, the wooden platforms have been used as far back as the Ottoman Empire.

But the collection took its own modern path of experimentation. The ornaments that are usually found embroidered on traditional Crimean Tatar clothing that hangs in museums were carved into corsets made of recycled plastic.

The boldly colored black, red, white and neon yellow plastic twisted and turned around the models, giving some of them sharp shapes around their waist and leaving others with open shoulders and skin.

City Life

With Daria Shulzhenko
shulzhenko@kyivpost.com

Ukrainian photography in spotlight of new artsy magazine

Publishing house Osnovy promoted Ukrainian photography through many of its publications. From provocative erotic collection to the portraits of female railroad employees — hundreds of shots by Ukrainian photographers were printed in Osnovy's heavy avant-garde books.

But Ukrainian photography is too rich and versatile to be contained in several themed publications.

To give the local photographers a platform they truly deserve, Osnovy has launched biannual magazine Saliut, featuring shots by both emerging and well-known Ukrainians. To reach as big an audience as possible, the magazine will be printed in English.

"Our task is to tell the world about Ukrainian culture and art," Dana Pavlychko, the director of Osnovy, told the Kyiv Post.

Called "Female," the debut issue will be published in March, exposing female photographers who documented or explored different stages in a woman's life working in various genres and styles.

"With this issue, we wanted to introduce Ukrainian women in photography and give them a voice," Pavlychko said.

The magazine's first edition will come in 1,000 copies, which will be distributed for free among art institutions and stores in Ukraine, as required by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation that funded it. All subsequent issues will be available for purchase through Osnovy.

Heritage

Photography has long been considered a mostly male job, especially while Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union.

Still, there were prominent female photographers throughout Ukrainian history, says Halyna Hleba, art historian and researcher of contemporary art and photography who was also the editor of Saliut's first issue.

In 2020, French publisher Textuel listed four Ukrainians among 300 most outstanding female photographers in "A Global History of Female Photographers." They were Sophia Yablonska, Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit, Rita Ostrovska and Iryna Pap. Each of them has left an imprint in Ukrainian and global culture.

Bold collection meets mixed reviews from Crimean Tatars

page 12 →

Hair braided into tiny hanging braids is a symbol of an unmarried woman in Crimean Tatar culture. A bride in all white finished the show, paying tribute to how important weddings are in Crimean Tatar culture, lasting three days at a time.

Balancing on wooden frames, the models walked down the runway to Crimean Tatar music with intricate non-traditional masks made of the same plastic, ornamented with pearls, pins and metal beads covering their mouths or entire face.

Veller had been twisting and turning her plastic ornaments and happened to make a mask. Although the masks had no association with traditional Crimean Tatar design, after a year of living through the coronavirus pandemic, the look felt appropriate.

"Of course it's artistic, it wouldn't be saving anyone," Veller says. "It just shows the beauty of the ornaments and of itself. It's not something to utilize."

Holding onto what's left

Veller's collection was praised by the fashion industry and other creatives. But there were mixed reactions in the same community it is trying to appreciate.

Many Crimean Tatars, especially the older generation, were shocked by the "Oyma" designs. Some comments online criticized the collection saying that it didn't accurately reflect what Crimean Tatar clothing should look like according to their conser-

Kosyanyan Chernichkin



Ukrainian designer Polina Veller shows pieces from her most recent "Oyma" collection inspired by Crimean Tatar culture, as she speaks with the Kyiv Post at her Kyiv workshop on Feb. 23, 2021. The collection was presented at the recent edition of the Ukrainian Fashion Week.

vative culture and religious ideals. The clothing showed too much skin or wasn't humble enough. It was too strange, too foreign to be recognized as Crimean Tatar, nothing like the usual traditional costumes that cover a woman's ankles, neck and wrists.

Some were not happy with the music that Crimean Tatar composer Ismail Kurtumerov wrote specifically

for the show because it wasn't traditional enough and had electronic sounds incorporated.

"It's incredibly complicated, it's a small society called the Crimean Tatars. And they won't let their own people manifest it," Veller says.

Crimean Tatars are a mainly Muslim culture, but with various degrees of interpretation. There is

a conservative minority that wears headscarves, and the majority that is more open, even fine with drinking alcohol.

But the main reason for the pushback was the cultural grip in the Crimean Tatar community.

Crimea has experienced tragic cycles of violence and sorrow throughout its history, from the 1944

deportation that killed half of the indigenous population to Russia's illegal occupation in 2014 and continued repressions. Throughout all of this, much of Crimean Tatar's history has gone missing. Physical artifacts and art were lost, burned and destroyed, not leaving much to interpret today.

Whatever is left is carefully conserved and held on to tightly.

"We have a deep trauma that has formed, and it does not allow us to further open up and move," Skybin says. "Everything that is new, from the point of view of the people, is perceived as a kind of globalization threat, an erasure of our identity."

Veller and Skybin carefully conveyed and showed their appreciation of Crimean Tatar symbols and artistry in the collection -- from the look of the final bride to the vines and plants repeated throughout the ornaments.

But Skybin believes that Crimean Tatar culture needs actualization, while its community should make a step toward progress.

With "Oyma," Veller showed that Crimean Tatar heritage can be part of modern culture.

"Thanks to Polina (Veller) we were able to actualize it," Skybin says. "It's important to us as a people."

Veller hopes that it's just the beginning of the Crimean Tatar cultural revival.

"I hope that after this, other designers will also push with their own collections and ideas," the designer says. "There might be more of a chance for some change, for becoming bolder." ❁

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City Life

In first issue of Saliut, women are behind and in front of the camera

page 12 →

Saliut will spotlight shots by Pap, who is considered most famous and prominent Ukrainian female photographer of the Soviet era.

Pap managed to become a successful photojournalist in the rather patriarchal Soviet society. She also founded a photography school under the Union of Journalists of Ukraine, that raised a number of star photographers including Viktor Maruschenko and Valerii Kerekesh.

Upon Pap's invitation, foreign artists came to Ukraine to teach locals the trends of photography at the time. That was new for Ukraine, according to Hleba.

The new generation of Ukrainian photographers emerged back then. They were more free and innovative in their artistic expression, breaking ground in the pseudo-optimistic Soviet photography that was more propaganda than documentary.

But they were mostly men.

Only in the 1990s, when Ukraine finally gained independence, that the number of female photographers in the country started to increase along with the new sense of freedom.

Thirty years later, the country is blooming with female photographers and the diversity of their artwork will soon be showcased on Saliut's pages.

Two covers

Many Ukrainians would be familiar with the title of the magazine that triggers an instant association with photography. Saliut is the name of a



Osnovy publishing house has launched a biannual magazine Saliut to promote Ukrainian photographers and their artwork. The first issue set to be out in March has two covers and features shots by 24 female photographers and art groups exploring different stages in a woman's life.

locally popular film camera that was manufactured at the Arsenal plant in Kyiv in the 1950–1970s.

The publication has an ambitious goal of exploring various themes and styles that define the Ukrainian photography of the past and today.

The front and center of the first issue is a woman, both behind and

in front of the camera. It brings together over 180 pictures by 24 photographers and art groups, whose shots explore a woman's life through documentary, landscape, portrait and fashion genres.

"We wanted to emphasize that there are many female photographers and each of them makes pow-

erful and self-sufficient projects," Hleba says.

The shots collected for the issue turned out so impressive that Saliut's team was lost when picking a cover, eventually giving up on the idea of settling for one and choosing two instead.

One of them is a tender and intimate self-portrait of Julia Kafizova, picturing her from the back, naked, sitting by the window, as her tan line matches the window frame line.

The second one is a provocative shot by Jane Laptiy showing a part of a male face with red-colored lips and a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

"(The first issue) is so ambivalent, gentle and bellicose and sometimes provocative and very sentimental," Hleba says, adding that it would be extremely difficult to choose one photograph to represent the whole collection.

What was a creative decision born out of necessity now serves as an unusual feature making Saliut stand out. That's why the two-cover format will stick around in the subsequent issues.

"You can order a magazine having no idea what cover you will receive," Pavlychko says.

Chapters

The 168-page "Female" edition of Saliut is divided into three chapters "Childhood," "Youth" and "Adulthood."

"We wanted to show a certain mental and age stage in a person's life, in particular in the life of a woman," Hleba says.

"Childhood," the magazine's first chapter, explores children's affection with mothers and the many joys of this infantile and playful period. It starts with the series of Ukrainian photographer Katya Lesiv, capturing motherhood through touching but powerful photographs of her own child.

Another project in the chapter is "Childreach" by Yana Hryhorenko. It features brightly-colored pictures of unusual playgrounds photographed in Kyiv and the city of Bila Tserkva in Kyiv Oblast, Hryhorenko's hometown.

The second chapter, "Youth," is less serene. It focuses on a period of acceptance of oneself, one's sexuality, as well as young women's struggle of meeting the expectations put upon them by modern society.

"It's about the need to understand who you are and what you are," Hleba says.

Both of the cover photographs belong to the "Youth" period.

Another prominent project in the chapter is Anna Melnykova's "Largo." It addresses the gender roles and a woman's search for a perfect man through seductive photographs that resemble Renaissance paintings.

The last chapter, "Adulthood," is about life experience, wrinkles and cracks of adult life.

"This is probably the most emotionally and visually difficult chapter of the magazine," Hleba says.

"The Dream of White Socks" series by Alina Smutko spotlights women forced to have abortions. It features heartbreaking photographs and stories of women who lost their children.

One of the photographers in the "Female" issue, Hryhorenko, says she was happy to join the project not just because of the opportunity to showcase her work. The artist believes that the magazine can contribute to a better understanding of photography by the public.

"(The launch of) Saliut is an absolutely grand event," Hryhorenko told the Kyiv Post. "All over the world there is no doubt that photography is a part of art — in our country, this understanding is just beginning to take shape."

The first issue of Saliut will be out in March — the date hasn't been set yet. It will be distributed for free in art institutions and stores. The list of the locations will be published at www.saliutmag.com. The next issues will be available to buy through Osnovy's store set to open in May and its website at www.osnovypublishing.com.



Ukraine aims to cancel clock change, remain with UTC+2

The Ukrainian parliament on March 3 passed a bill in the first reading to cancel the practice of changing the clock twice a year. If the parliament passes the bill in the second reading by March 25, Ukraine will forever stay in the UTC +2 time zone, Ukraine's winter time, that lasts from Oct. 25 to March 25.

Changing from summer time to winter time every six months has a negative effect on human health, according to author of the bill Ruslan Stefanchuk, parliament's first deputy speaker. Besides, opposed to the public opinion and to its main purpose, he said, the practice does not help to save energy, which was the main argument to introduce it in Soviet Ukraine back in 1981.

Japan, India, and China are the only major industrialized countries that do not change the clock. Russia and Belarus don't change it either.



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Oleg Petrasliuk

Protesting Sternenko's imprisonment

Supporters of activist Serhiy Sternenko, recently imprisoned on kidnapping charges, burn flares in a march on the Prosecutor General's Office in Kyiv on Feb. 27, 2021. About 10,000 people took to the streets to demand the release of the Odesa activist, who was sentenced on Feb. 23 to seven years in prison. The verdict, seen as persecution for his political activism, has prompted a backlash from civil society. Sternenko's supporters accuse his political enemies, including Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova and president's deputy chief of staff Oleh Tatarov, of fabricating the case.



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