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# Vladimir Putin Killer On The Loose

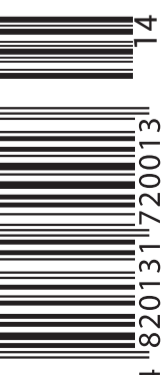
US President Joe Biden is right. Russia's president is also a mass murderer and war criminal, responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people in Ukraine, Syria & Russia. He remains implicated in the assassinations of critics. The 68-year-old Kremlin dictator is making plans to stay in power for life.

**How many more people will he kill before he is stopped?**



See coverage starting on page 16

A displaced Syrian family sit amid the rubble of their destroyed home in Ariha, part of Syria's Idlib province, on May 4, 2020. The Kremlin has invaded Syria, Ukraine and Georgia and waged a brutal war in one of Russia's regions, Chechnya. Russian dictator Vladimir Putin stands accused of war crimes and is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people. About 20 of his political opponents have also been killed.



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Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash reacts prior to a public hearing at the supreme court in Vienna on June 25, 2019. Despite living in Austria and fighting a U.S. extradition order since 2014, Firtash preserves his influence on Ukraine through his network of gas distribution companies and his Inter TV channel.

AFP

# Firtash should be next oligarch Ukrainian leadership takes on



**Sergii Leshchenko**  
[mail.pravda@gmail.com](mailto:mail.pravda@gmail.com)

For the past three months, the Ukrainian oligarch club has been suffering losses. Two top players have been disqualified — Viktor Medvedchuk and Ihor Kolomoisky.

A close friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Medvedchuk was deprived of his main asset — a media weapon in the form of three TV channels. They allowed him to manipulate the entire Ukrainian society and to build up the political power of the Opposition Platform — For Life party. Today, Medvedchuk is regularly questioned by the SBU, and his offices and home undergo searches.

Kolomoisky was deprived of influence in the Servant of the People faction when his main mouthpiece, Oleksandr Dubinsky, who was subjected to U.S. sanctions, was kicked out. Last year, the state-owned company Centrenergy — which Kolomoisky allegedly used for his profit — received a new general director in an attempt to block the oligarch's influence in the company. Law enforcement is looking into embezzlement schemes at the enterprise. Meanwhile, the Anti-monopoly Committee imposed a record fine of Hr 4.7 billion (around \$170 million) on Kolomoisky's companies for abuses of the gasoline market.

But there's another oligarch in this club that Ukraine shouldn't forget. So far, he hasn't received a proper state response for defying the law and enriching himself through corruption. His name is Dmytro Firtash.

## Remember Firtash?

Firtash is a friend of several

Ukrainian presidents. He was indicted in 2014 for what federal prosecutors in the Northern District of Illinois allege was his role in bribing Indian officials to get a lucrative mining deal to sell titanium to Boeing.

Since 2014, he has been living in Vienna and contesting his extradition to the U.S. At one point, Firtash even became part of ex-President Donald Trump's conspiracy theory. Although Firtash is closely tied to Russia, he has a direct influence not only on Ukrainian politics but also on public sentiment, possessing the leverage to sway social discontent.

His leverage relies not only on the InterTV channel, which he owns, but also the largest network of regional gas stations in the country, which almost caused riots last fall due to a sharp increase in tariffs.

Firtash is a typical product of the tumultuous 1990s. He was educated at a railroad college as a locomotive engineer and served for a time in the fire department. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he was in the food and fox breeding business. Once a shipment of his goods went to Turkmenistan and when no money was received from there, Firtash personally went to sort it out. The local authorities offered to cover the debt not with money but with gas. That is how he got into the chain of trade relations, which were supervised by the Kremlin-controlled Gazprom's then-darling, Igor Makarov, and the Itera group of companies that he created.

Years later, tired of cooperating with Itera, Firtash decided to pro-

mote himself as an independent figure. But he needed protection, and eventually found Semion Mogilevich, a Russian criminal mastermind originally from Kyiv, who was listed by the FBI as one of the 10 most wanted criminals. This decision became a turning point in Firtash's life — as it got him on the radar of the U.S. intelligence agencies.

The year 2002 was a time of great political redistribution in Ukraine. Then-President Leonid Kuchma miraculously escaped the consequences of journalist Georgiy Gongadze's Sept. 16, 2000, murder. Kuchma cemented the power structure and Viktor Yanukovich became his designated successor. Medvedchuk was supposed to oversee the smooth transit of power. And Firtash's future friends create a counterbalance to Medvedchuk when the young and ambitious Sergei Lyovochkin became an adviser to Kuchma, and Yuriy Boyko became the new head of Naftogaz.

That was the beginning of the future gas clan, which would become a shareholder first of the Party of Regions and then of Opposition Platform — For Life.

## Gas trade

Firtash's first middleman gas company was Eural Trans Gas (ETG). It was registered by Mogilevich's lawyer and listed three unemployed Romanian citizens as beneficiaries.

It looked unconvincing and soon a new Swiss company, RosUkrEnerg, became the intermediary for gas deals between Russia and Ukraine. RosUkrEnerg was launched mere months before the 2004 presidential elections, which ended in falsifications in favor of Yanukovich and was followed by the Orange Revolution that overturned the elec-

tion and brought Viktor Yushchenko to power.

In the 2007 snap parliamentary elections, the Firtash-Lyovochkin group decided to take root in Yanukovich's orbit. The so-called Donetsk clan, who were used to disposing of the Party of Regions as their property, unexpectedly found competitors at their side. They emerged with the approval of Yanukovich, who did not want to depend on billionaire oligarch Rinat Akhmetov alone.

It is this group that would stop Yanukovich from joining a broad coalition with Yulia Tymoshenko in 2010, even when Akhmetov gave the go-ahead to the merger with the opponent. Yanukovich appreciated the good service of Lyovochkin and eventually allowed him to develop into a full-fledged oligarch.

## Regional gas companies

After amassing resources on gas supplies from Turkmenistan and Russia, the RosUkrEnerg group decided to expand its influence by knocking on every Ukrainian's door. They bought regional gas distribution companies. At the same time, the parliament voted to "forgive" those private regional gas distributors their debts.

The regional gas distributors by themselves mean nothing. It is a room in an office building where several people sit and move papers from one pile to another. What is important is the distribution networks that bring gas from the main pipe to households. Legally, they remain state property, although they are managed by regional gas distributors free of charge. That is how Firtash began controlling the gas supply to the population.

# Women in Ukraine give birth alone during the pandemic

By Liliane Bivings  
bivings@kyivpost.com

Early in the morning on Feb. 25, Oleksiy Yushkov listened to a doctor at Cherkasy's regional hospital maternity ward tell him his wife didn't make it.

Yushkov and his wife Lena exchanged texts and calls throughout the day before, after she checked in to give birth. But around midday, Lena stopped answering.

The doctors informed Yushkov and his mother-in-law that Lena had given birth at 3:35 p.m. on Feb. 24, but died from blood loss at 4:10 a.m. the morning after.

COVID-19 protocols kept Yushkov from joining Lena in the delivery room. He wondered why no one called to tell the family their son had been delivered, or that the mother wasn't well. He suspects the doctors hadn't even noticed until it was too late.

Since COVID-19 arrived, women in Ukraine have consistently faced bans on having their partners in the delivery room. They were forced to give birth alone, in maternity hospitals notorious for mistreating patients.

Not only is this contrary to World Health Organization recommendations, it is illegal in Ukraine.

According to the law, a woman has the right to have up to two partners in the delivery room. The Health Ministry never officially banned the practice, but some local and regional health departments did it anyway, ostensibly to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infections.

Yevhenia Kubakh, co-founder of motherhood advocacy nonprofit Natural Rights Ukraine, says that local and regional hospitals don't have the right to defy the ministry, and that placing restrictions on women giving birth "is a human rights violation."

The Health Ministry responded by saying it "never banned partners at the ministry level." But it also never demanded that hospitals allow partners, stating that restrictions "minimize the risk of infection and protect the health and lives of Ukrainians, including in childbirth."



Oleksiy Yushkov, along with his mother-in-law, father-in-law, and brother, pick up his newborn son at the Cherkasy Oblast Regional Hospital on March 8. Lena, Oleksiy's wife, died of blood loss after delivery in this hospital on Feb. 25.

Courtesy of Oleksiy Yushkov

how she also feared she could be mistreated or verbally abused by the medical staff even if she chose to give birth at a private hospital.

The price of giving birth at a private maternity hospital starts at \$2,000. In some cases, when there are health complications, a woman can be directed to a state hospital, where doctors have more experience in treating these specific issues.

Giving birth abroad can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$30,000, depending on the country. In Ukraine, where the average monthly salary is around \$375, that is not an option for most families.

## Home births

As women seek alternatives, home births have been increasing in recent years, says Salnykova.

While it is legal for a woman to give birth at home, it is illegal for doctors to provide medical assistance during a home birth.

So home births are usually assisted by midwives who are self-taught and use whatever resources they can find to assist childbirth. At the moment, the Health Ministry isn't ready to give midwives legal status, says Salnykova.

If women face complications during a home delivery and have to be rushed to the hospital, they sometimes report mistreatment by hospital staff for attempting a home birth. Sometimes they're refused immediate treatment.

Kyiv's maternity hospital No. 5 wants to be different. It created an entire "home birth center" in its maternity ward, with rooms that are meant to resemble a home.

Vladislav Berestoviy, an obstetrician at the maternity hospital, says that last year around fifty women had "home births" in its maternity ward. In the first three months of the year, the hospital has performed over a hundred.

Providing this alternative is part of the maternity hospital's "My Personal Birth Plan," developed with women and their partners to ensure women have the delivery they want.

"We began listening to women, not telling them what to do, but asking them what they want," says Dmytro Govseev, the director of maternity hospital No. 5.

While doctors' attitudes in maternity hospitals in the capital may be improving, "they are the exception in Ukraine," Salnykova says. 🇺🇦

## Bureaucracy & COVID-19

A partner's presence can mean the difference between life and death. At a meeting organized by Natural Rights Ukraine last year, one woman said that when she started to hemorrhage after labor, her husband had to run around the hospital to find a doctor to help, ultimately saving her life.

Earlier this year, couple Gregory and Nataliya Fedosenko requested permission several times from the Ivano Frankivsk city maternity hospital to be together when she gave birth. In the end their requests were denied, apparently because "they didn't include the correct documents."

Fedosenko's wife had to give birth without her partner, but the family is still suing the city for a violation of their rights.

"For us it's important to prove this was a violation of rights and for those responsible to be held accountable," said Fedosenko. "If you

don't defend this right, there's a good chance it will be violated again and again."

It's difficult to pinpoint why some local health departments ban partners in delivery rooms and others don't.

To Fedosenko it is a matter of bureaucratic dysfunction. Ivano Frankivsk's Health Department refused orders from the city council to allow partners, instead taking direction from the State Emergency Service of Ukraine.

Kateryna Bulavinova, a health expert at UNICEF Ukraine, doesn't believe health departments' intentions were malicious, but also notes that partners in the delivery room were not to blame for the high COVID-19 rates in hospitals.

"I think it was misguided to exclusively ban partners in delivery without even improving general practices of infectious virus control (in hospitals)," she said.

According to Fedosenko, his wife was never even tested for COVID-19 before going into labor.

## Part of a pattern

But Anastasiya Salnykova, a doula and co-founder of Natural Rights Ukraine, says these restrictions represent a broader disregard for women's feelings during pregnancy and childbirth that has existed long before the pandemic.

According to a report by the organization, the most widespread mistreatment women experience during pregnancy and childbirth is the violation of informed consent.

Often, women are not informed of upcoming medical interventions, such as artificially breaking their water, surgical cutting to facilitate delivery, and administering medications.

In a 2019 survey of 7,100 women

Oleg Petrasjuk



Maternity hospital No. 5 in Kyiv on April 1. The hospital's director, Dmytro Govseev, never banned partners in the delivery room and says there was absolutely no reason for other hospitals around the country to ban them.

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EDITORIALS

# Vlad the Killer

Russian dictator Vladimir Putin sent a chemical assassination squad after his main opponent, Alexei Navalny, and poisoned him with a Novichok chemical agent, almost killing him.

After Navalny recovered from coma, he was jailed on trumped-up charges as soon as he returned to Russia. Now he says he's being tortured in prison.

This is what Putin does. Navalny's poisoning is just the latest in about 20 assassinations and mysterious deaths of Putin's critics. And even that is only a fraction of Putin's atrocities. The would-be president-for-life has also invaded Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, killing easily tens of thousands of people – many of them innocent and defenseless civilians.

The West's response to these actions has been weak so far. Putin is using a wide network of useful idiots and paid agents in the West who promote his agenda.

Western countries are reluctant to antagonize Russia due to its size, military might and lucrative trade. They also think it's better not to push too hard against the Kremlin to leave room for negotiations.

But the main question is: Do the current sanctions work? They obviously don't.

In spite of all the sanctions, the Kremlin keeps killing its political opponents both in Russia and in the West. Some of the assassinations involved the targeted use of chemical and radiological weapons against British citizens on British soil – something that goes beyond mere murder and constitutes an act of aggression against a NATO country.

The Kremlin also continues killing people in the countries it has invaded – Ukraine and Syria.

There have been some exceptions to the West's strategy of appeasing dictators and terrorists: the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 military intervention in Libya. Putin has always posed a greater threat than the late Taliban leader Mohammed Omar, Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein and Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. He is vastly more powerful than those three combined.

The best way to stop Putin's killing spree is to impose truly crippling and painful sanctions – freeze his proxy-run foreign accounts, cut Russia off from the SWIFT payment system, introduce an embargo on Russian oil or ban investors from buying Russian sovereign debt. He should be booted out of international institutions for his war crimes and failure to adhere to democracy. Political-business projects, like Nord Stream 2, should be stopped.

There is the argument that Putin's regime will still survive sanctions and turn into a North Korea-style hermit kingdom. Maybe. But at least the Kremlin will have less resources and less money to kill opponents and invade other countries.

# Get it together

The ineffectiveness of the Ukrainian government has never manifested itself as dangerously as during the COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

It's an exercise in masochism to look at the vaccination statistics from developed countries and compare them to Ukraine's. As the U.S. upped its pace to administering over 3 million doses per day, Ukraine administered 334,000 doses in six weeks.

The U.S. population is nearly eight times bigger than Ukraine's, but its pace of vaccination is more than 200 faster than Ukraine's. The U.K. is another frontrunner in terms of vaccination. Scientists say the country will achieve herd immunity within days. And of course there is Israel, which has vaccinated more than half of its population and is returning to the pre-COVID way of life.

How does seeing that make Ukrainians feel? Neglected. Underprivileged. Frustrated.

Most of the time we in Ukraine can pretend that we live a life similar to people in the West. We watch the same movies and TV shows, eat the same food and wear the same clothes. But at times like these, we get an uncomfortable wake-up call. No, we don't enjoy the same opportunities as people in richer countries, we are not equal.

We are left to jealously watch as the developed world gets the vaccines. Soon, we will be watching it get back to normal life, repopulate cafes and go to soccer games.

It would be easy to attribute this disparity just to the fact that Ukraine is poor. If that were true, it would have been easier to stomach. But unfortunately, it's not just about the money.

Another factor is the disorganized mess that the government has made of the vaccination drive.

In early April, President Volodymyr Zelensky ordered to "create a national vaccination plan." There is just one little issue. The vaccination campaign was already well into its sixth week by then.

It was clear from the beginning that the campaign is problematic. People were turning down the vaccine en masse, influenced by disinformation about its quality. That was unsurprising. The anti-vaccine attitudes were clear long before Ukraine started inoculating citizens in February.

The government had almost a year to put together a contingency plan: Decide on how to unroll the vaccination quickly, combat disinformation, and prepare a database of everyone willing to get vaccinated. Nothing was done in advance. If officials responsible for vaccination were managers in the private sector, they would have been fired for being shortsighted and incompetent. But in the public sector, they suffer no consequences – instead, they are left in charge of vaccination, a matter of life and death.

And what is left for regular Ukrainians to do? Some get into a habit of hanging out outside vaccination centers in the afternoons, waiting for a spare dose that would have been thrown away.

Long used to the ineffectiveness of their government, Ukrainians are once again taking their fate into their own hands.

But it's no way to conduct mass vaccination. If Ukraine wants to return to normal life any time soon, the government has to get its act together for once.



**NEWS ITEM:** President Volodymyr Zelensky on April 4 approved the national vaccination plan to inoculate most adult citizens by the end of 2021. The president approved the plan for Ukraine's vaccination campaign more than one month after the first citizen received a shot.



**NEWS ITEM:** A journalist with TV channel Ukraina was talking on camera about how many Ukrainians have switched to bicycles during the coronavirus pandemic. The network is always very loyal to its owner, the country's richest oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov. While broadcasting live, the journalist stopped a biker and asked him why he bikes instead of using public transport or a car. The man said, "Because Akhmetov is a twink." The journalist was taken aback but carried on as if nothing happened.



**NEWS ITEM:** Ukrainian lawmakers declared 46,351 bitcoins in 2020. As of April 8, that's equivalent to \$2.7 million. Only 25 officials had bitcoins in 2016. This year, 652 officials declared ownership of cryptocurrency on their virtual accounts.



**NEWS ITEM:** As Kyiv restricted public transport to curb the spread of coronavirus, the city's roads became paralyzed by heavy traffic. The transportation nightmare was caused by the intensification of lockdown measures. Starting from April 5, only employees of essential services who managed to get a special permit from the government could use public transport, including the metro. Kyivans who didn't receive a permit complained of price gouging on taxi prices, which jumped by 4-10 times, depending on district and time of the day.

See these features online at [kyivpost.com](http://kyivpost.com)

## Ukraine's Friend & Foe Of The Week



Friend

**Albert Bourla, CEO of Pfizer**  
U.S. pharmaceutical Pfizer agreed to provide 10 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Ukraine, thus helping the country fighting the spread of the virus. This vaccine is 91% effective in preventing the disease.



Foe

**Jens Spahn, German's minister of health**  
German Health Minister Jens Spahn announced that Germany could buy Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, going against the European Union's policy. Germany's willingness to buy the Russian vaccines reminds about its behavior in another polarizing issue, Nord Stream 2.

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

The Kyiv Post welcomes letters to the editors and opinion pieces, usually 800 to 1,000 words in length. Please email all correspondence to chief editor Brian Bonner, at [bonner@kyivpost.com](mailto:bonner@kyivpost.com). All correspondence must include an email address and contact phone number for verification.

# Private copying levy needs to be more transparent in Ukraine



Mikheil Saakashvili

The development of transparency instruments in the areas of public interest such as electronic declarations, ProZorro, and financial reporting is one of the major accomplishments of Ukrainian civil society. However, there are still many grey areas that are not functioning well.

One such area is a private copying levy and the functioning of collective management organizations to distribute income from such levies among the entitled persons. The basic reason for introducing the private copying levy (and similar reprographic levy) is to charge certain items a fee that would compensate to authors the reproduction at home and exclusively for personal purposes of works and performances recorded in phonograms, videograms, as well as reprographic reproduction of literary, photographic, visual and other similar works without the consent of the copyright owners.

Thus, businesses and private citizens as end users are supposed to pay a fee for each device that is artificially determined to be subject to levy. This levy is then distributed by the collective management organizations among the authors. However, there is still not enough transparency and accountability as to how the organizations, known as CMOs, should allocate the cost. The CMO has been accused of misusing the funds multiple times, as per journalists' reports.

Currently, levy rates have to be agreed upon through negotiation between an accredited CMO and users (importers). If parties fail to

agree on the rate within 60 calendar days, the court has to step in and decide on that. Therefore, both the list of devices that are subject to levy and the rate at which it should be collected is unknown. Such a procedure is neither fair nor transparent and entices corruption while also overburdening the business with additional costs. Moreover, the lack of legislative certainty in terms of rates undermines the rule of law in Ukraine.

The significant issue in relation to the private copying levy in Ukraine is the amount of discretion in the hands of CMO and, later, courts. It is crucial to enshrine clear and concise rules of the game so that businesses can plan for the future and avoid unnecessary litigation. The legal uncertainty around the levy for the transition period as well as the absence of well-regulated court proceedings to determine the amount to be paid is damaging to the Ukrainian economy. Moreover, the potential levy rates do not correspond with Ukraine's GDP per capita which is incoherent and damaging.

The levy was first introduced in Germany in the 1960s. With the advent of audiocassettes, lawmakers were convinced that cassette recorders would reduce record sales by making copies of a single purchased album. Today, recordable CDs and equipment that did not exist back then are subject to the levy.

European Union member states differ in their approach towards levy rates. In 2012, Spanish government abolished private copying fees for all. Fees of this kind aren't collected in Ireland, Bulgaria, Malta, and Luxembourg. The United Kingdom



Unsplash/Brett Jordan

One of Ukraine's many grey areas in need of improvement is a private copying levy and the functioning of collective management organizations to distribute income from such levies among the entitled persons, according to Mikheil Saakashvili, chair of the executive committee of the National Reforms Council.

chose not to put them in place at all.

The experts of the Office of Simple Solutions & Results (OSSR) developed a balanced reform for Ukraine in order to help improve the administration of the private copying levy, ensure more transparency, and protect competition.

Most importantly, we propose to enshrine levy rates in the law so that importers do not need to interact with collective management organizations and, potentially, courts. This will ensure that the rules of the game are clear from the start and remove the corruption and bureaucracy element.

Additionally, we also believe it is essential to ensure that future reporting made by collective management

organizations includes a list of copyright objects for which the levy was collected and their share in these. An automated and transparent system of functioning of CMOs has to be introduced using effective software.

What it means, is that since businesses are charged with this levy, and regular citizens as end-users are paying extra for their products in order for CMO to function, it is not only fair but also essential that clear reporting and transparency is in place. This transparency is also crucial for authors who are supposed to benefit from the levy. The Ukrainian public should be made aware of what copyright-subject pieces were recognized as such that are worthy of compensation, and what method-

ology was used to calculate that.

On April 7, 2021, the Office of Simple Solutions & Results (OSSR) hosted an open discussion between the respective stakeholder on the matter, and we call on the interested parties to work together on finding a common ground. In our pursuit of a more prosperous future, we must make sure that legislative certainty, the rule of law, and transparency prevail.

*Mikheil Saakashvili has been the chair of the executive committee of the National Reforms Council since May 7, 2020. He served as governor of Odesa Oblast from May 30, 2015, to Nov. 9, 2016. He was president of Georgia from Jan. 25, 2004, to Nov. 17, 2013.*

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Jack Chen

Jack Chen has joined Arzinger law firm's team as a counsel and the head of the China & EU desk.

Jack specializes in international and EU trade & investment, M&A, IPRs, EU competition and regulatory law. He also has a wide corporate law practice and advises on commercial law. He has been acting for a range of international companies, trade associations and governments both in China and in Europe.

"Over the last years, ARZINGER has been working more intensively with clients from Asia, so we see Jack Chen's arrival as a logical step for strengthening firm's positions in the region. China has been increasing its presence all across the industries in Ukraine and we are delighted to have a chance to offer our Chinese clients a much higher level of service & expertise with a highly qualified native speaker joining our team," says Timur Bondaryev, managing and founding partner at ARZINGER.

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# World in Ukraine: France



In partnership with

L'ORÉAL UKRAINE GOLAW

**Editor's Note:** World in Ukraine takes a look at Ukraine's bilateral relations with different nations. All articles are written independently from advertisers.

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## Trade between Ukraine, France remains robust despite crisis

By Natalia Datskevych  
[datskevych@kyivpost.com](mailto:datskevych@kyivpost.com)

Strict lockdowns and quarantine measures amid the COVID-19 pandemic barely dented trade between Ukraine and France in 2020.

Bilateral trade with France, Ukraine's fourth largest trading partner in the European Union, reached \$2.1 billion last year, a few hundred million dollars less than the pre-coronavirus year of 2019, but still robust.

The trade ties remain durable as the two countries trade cars, wine, boats and more. "Both countries continued to strengthen their economic relationship," said Bertrand Barrier, head of the French-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce.

### French cars

Ukraine mainly exports agricultural products to France while importing pharmaceutical goods, food, beverages and French cars.

Every fifth new car sold this March came from French brands Peugeot, Citroen and Renault. The latter is the most popular car brand with Ukrainians at the moment.

Beating Japan's Toyota, sales of new Renault automobiles took the lead last month. Ukrainians bought 1,263 Renault cars, mainly crossovers, helping the company reach 14% of total market share.

"The market was growing well in March, and we were glad to see that," Renault Ukraine spokeswoman Anna Sibekina told the Kyiv Post.

But just a year ago, the company had difficulties amid government restrictions aimed to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Renault had to



A car made by French manufacturer Renault drives in Kyiv on April 8, 2021. Every fifth new car sold in March came from French brands Peugeot, Citroen and Renault. The latter is the most popular car brand with Ukrainians at the moment.

"adapt to new realities, establish productive work with the dealer network," Sibekina said.

And the French manufacturer managed the new reality well.

The company ended last year with 16,390 cars sold in Ukraine and a 17% market share in the country. Three out of five most popular models on the country's market were also Renault's — the five seater jeep

Duster, compact sedan Logan and city hatchback Sandero.

Barrier believes that car producers, just like other French businesses in Ukraine, did well as they have already gained experience working in a "quite difficult environment" during previous crises.

Besides, Ukrainians spent more money locally due to travel restrictions. "People did not have the possibility to shop abroad as much as before," said Barrier.

### Food & wine

The total worth of imported wines to Ukraine hit a record \$180 million in 2020.

With a 15% market share, France was the second largest wine exporter to Ukraine, sandwiched between Italy and Georgia. This year's results may be even better as Ukraine lifted import duties on wine produced in the EU for the next seven years.

"The volume of import of French wines to Ukraine has increased recently which is positive news," said Barrier.

According to Peralcon, an advisory company in the food sector, the market of the European wines will only grow in Ukraine. "We expect new foreign players to enter the arena, including emerging small and medium-sized wineries," Peralcon

experts wrote.

Cheese, often a great companion to wine, was also among top products imported from France to Ukraine.

In total, 3,900 tons of French cheese, or 8% of total imports, ended up on the shelves of local grocery stores, making France the country's third largest source of cheese in 2020 after Poland and Germany.

For the past five years, the volume of all imported cheese to Ukraine has increased ninefold — from 5,400 tons in 2015 to 46,800 tons in 2020.

This trend is not in favor of domestic producers as "it's hard for them to compete with the EU producers in terms of quality and price," according to Ukrainian Agribusiness Club.

Meanwhile, fueled by France's demand for berries and nuts, Ukrainian exporters earned nearly \$20 million, according to Ukrainian Agriculture Export Association.

France was the final destination for nearly one tenth of Ukrainian exports of walnuts and berries, mainly frozen blueberries and raspberries, last year. By the end of 2020, France has become the second largest buyer among European countries after Poland.

Figures could be even higher if it

wasn't for additional "customs procedures at borders" and there was "less transportation by sea and land," according to Dmytro Kroshka, head of the association.

### Supplying boats

After Russia illegally annexed Crimea seven years ago, seizing 75% of Ukrainian naval ships based there, Ukraine was left helpless amid the growing military threat from the sea.

With only a 30-year-old flagship frigate Hetman Sahaidachny and a couple of rusty vessels to its name, the country desperately needs additional patrol boats to ensure security in the 12-mile coastline zone.

In 2020, Ukraine signed a 136-million-euro contract with French shipbuilding company Ocea for the supply of 20 patrol boats for the State Border Guard Service.

France will build 15 boats, the rest will be constructed on Ukraine's Mykolaiv sea port.

Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal called the contract a "strategic order," since Ukraine will not only employ hundreds of people while manufacturing ships, but also receive experience and technology.

According to Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, the hull for the first 32-meter patrol boat has already been built.

"These are the real results of joint Ukrainian-French cooperation to protect our maritime borders," Avakov announced on Feb.15. "We expect to receive the first boat in the fall of this year."

### Investment plans

Around 180 French companies currently operate in Ukraine. As of the first half of 2020, foreign direct investment from France to Ukraine reached \$1.1 billion, according to the government's investment promotion office UkraineInvest.

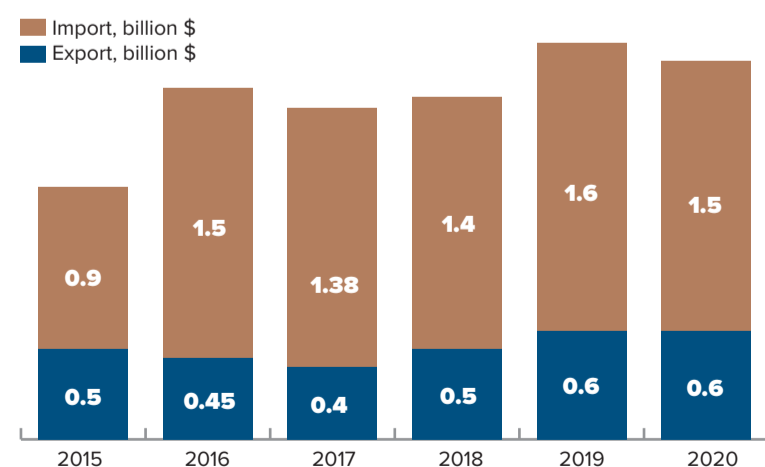
But while Ukraine's agricultural and IT sectors continue to be the main drivers for French investors, the future of renewable energy projects is uncertain, according to Barrier.

"The renewable sector was strongly affected by the change in the tariff legislation," he said, referring to Ukraine cutting its green tariff to 0.16 euros for a kilowatt.

Still he believes that there is an interest in Ukraine among investors — it will recover as soon as the economy, hurt by the pandemic, bounces back.

Barrier said: "We have a strong feeling that investments were only postponed." ❄️

### Trade between Ukraine and France



Source: State Customs Service of Ukraine

Bilateral trade between Ukraine and France has been growing since 2015 and reached \$2.1 billion in 2020.

# Ambassador gets ready for Zelensky, Macron visit in Paris

By Brian Bonner  
bonner@kyivpost.com

After stops in Qatar, the war front in the eastern Donbas and soon in Turkey, President Volodymyr Zelensky is heading to Paris likely by the end of next week for a meeting with his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron.

And France's ambassador to Ukraine, Etienne de Poncins, of course, will be on the plane with Zelensky. "The main purpose of the visit is to have a one-on-one meeting with Macron," de Poncins said.

There will be a lot to talk about. For sure, two of the biggest subjects on the presidential agenda are Russia's ongoing military build-up near Ukraine's eastern border and the status of Ukraine's reforms, particularly in creating an independent and trustworthy judiciary.

France is concerned about the Russian moves. De Poncins said the Russian reinforcements are "significantly different than what we have seen in previous years," but noted that "maybe we are less alarmed



French Ambassador to Ukraine Etienne de Poncins speaks with the Kyiv Post on April 7, 2021.

than some of our partners."

As for Ukraine's halting progress on reforms, the ambassador is convinced that Zelensky has the will to change the country, but has yet to find the way to succeed.

Earlier this year, ambassadors from the G7 nations – including the United States, France, Germany, Japan, Canada, Italy and the United Kingdom – presented Ukraine with their recommendations for overhauling the nation's distrusted and corrupt judiciary. The perennial problem is stifling investment into the economy, one of the poorest in Europe, with a gross domestic product of only \$150 billion for 42 million people.

"We have no doubt about his will to put in place reforms. This is important, but it's not sufficient," de Poncins said of the Zelensky administration's ambitions. "But when we go into the details about how the reforms are doing, we continue to be frustrated. Since September, the focus is on the mother of all reforms, the judiciary. This is the key. This

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## Cosmetics giant L'Oréal contributes to solve ecological, social world challenges

L'Oréal has devoted itself to beauty for over 100 years. L'Oréal Ukraine was founded in 2004. With its unique portfolio of 19 diverse and complementary brands represented in Ukraine, L'Oréal Ukraine is present across the following distribution networks: perfumeries, department stores, pharmacies and drugstores, hair salons, branded retail and e-commerce.

Joint growth is one of the main themes underlying L'Oréal's CSR commitments. In particular, the Group pays more and more attention to the surrounding communities, creating projects that address real social needs. Corporate social responsibility is a key point of company's DNA.

### SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM "L'ORÉAL FOR THE FUTURE"

Global warming is accompanied by environmental changes that threaten potentially permanent degradation of human and natural habitats. Sea levels, melting glaciers, ocean warming and acidification as well as extreme weather events are on the rise. With higher stakes must come stronger commitments. This is the reason why L'Oréal has decided to take its efforts even further through a sustainability program "L'Oréal for the Future". The program's commitments towards 2030 mark the beginning of a more radical transformation and embody company's view as to what its vision, purpose and responsibilities should be to meet the challenges facing the world.

By 2025, all of the L'Oréal Group's sites will achieve carbon neutrality by improving energy efficiency and using 100% renewable energy. In 2030, 100% of the water used for industrial purposes will be recycled and reused in a closed loop. By 2030, 95% of the ingredients in formulas will be bio-based, derived from abundant minerals or from circular processes. 100% of the plastic used in packaging will be either from recycled or bio-based sources in 2030 (we will reach 50% by 2025).

But the initial targets for the environment impact of production sites were set in early 2008. In 2013, the company launched a global sustainability program "Sharing Beauty with All". By 2020, L'Oréal made a significant impact by way of a sustainable and responsible business model. **Between 2005 and 2020, the company reduced CO2 emissions of the plants and distribution centers by 81% in absolute terms, exceeding initial targets of almost 60% by 2020. At the end of 2019, L'Oréal had 35 carbon neutral sites (meaning they use 100% renewable energy), including 14 factories.**



**- 81%**  
2020 result:  
CO2  
emissions



**- 37%**  
2020 result:  
Water  
consumption



**96%**  
2020 result:  
New or renovated  
products with  
an improved  
environmental  
or social profile



**100 905**  
2020 result:  
People from  
underprivileged  
communities  
gained access to  
employment

### BRANDS ACTING TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE PEOPLE

In October 2019, L'Oréal partnered with Albéa, a leader in cosmetic packaging, to develop a new cosmetic tube, in which the plastic part is replaced by an FSC-certified paper-based material, thereby reducing the amount of plastic used by 45% compared to a conventional tube. This year, in Ukraine three L'Oréal brands will launch a range of paper tube products: La Roche-Posay, Vichy and Garnier.

L'Oréal Paris brand aims to end street harassment in public space. In March 2021, L'Oréal Paris together with Hollaback\* and UNFPA in Ukraine (United Nations Population Fund) have launched the "Stand Up Against Street Harassment" educational program in Ukraine. The program aims to teach 1 million men and women all over the world how to react and what to do if you experience street harassment or become a bystander. Each can pass E-training on website [www.stand-up.ukraine.com](http://www.stand-up.ukraine.com) or register on free webinars. \*Hollaback! is a global leader in the movement to end harassment, NGO based in New York, USA.

76 million young women globally are affected by illiteracy. To help these young women have a voice and the means to build their future, Lancôme has created the Write Her Future initiative. The objective is to enable women to become literate, creating a positive impact on their quality of life and the quality of life of their families and those around them.

### L'ORÉAL-UNESCO "FOR WOMEN AND SCIENCE" AWARDS

According to a UNESCO study on women in science released today, while the number of women pursuing careers in science is on the rise, reaching just over 33% of the world's researchers, progress is still too slow, particularly in Physical Sciences, Mathematics, Computer Science and Engineering. Only 28% of engineering graduates and 40% of computer science graduates are women.

Based on the conviction that the world needs science, and that science needs women, the Fondation L'Oréal and UNESCO are committed to the promotion of women in science, in order to render them more visible, make their talent known and inspire vocations. Since the creation of the For Women in Science program in 1998, 117 Laureates and over 3,500 talented young scientists, PhD candidates and post-doctorates have been supported and honored in 117 countries.

The L'ORÉAL-UNESCO program "For Women in Science" has been active in Ukraine since 2018. In April 2021 L'Oréal Ukraine launches the fourth season of the program in Ukraine.

The program in Ukraine is aimed at supporting young women scientists who are professionally engaged in research in the fields of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) in Ukraine in any institution of higher education, research centers of these institutions or in scientific institutions of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Applicants must have a degree, publications in journals indexed in Scopus International Scientometric Databases and / or Web of Science and are socially active to promote science.

Applications for participation in the fourth season of the Ukrainian L'Oréal-UNESCO Award "For Women in Science" will start in April 2021 via platform [www.forwomeninscience.com](http://www.forwomeninscience.com) and will last for three months. The next step is selection of ten finalists to participate in the interviews held by honorable members of the jury in September-October 2021 and the announcement of the three winners in November 2021.

The members of the jury are the leading scientists of Ukraine – academics who are recognized experts in the fields of STEM and have an impeccable scientific and ethical reputation. Each of the three Laureates will receive a cash prize of UAH 150,000 after mandatory deductions and fees.

**The world needs science, and science needs women!**



**100 %**  
of the water used in  
industrial processes  
will be recycled and  
reused in a loop in  
2030.



**95 %**  
of ingredients in  
formula will be  
biobased, derived from  
abundant minerals  
or from circular  
processes by 2030.



**100 %**  
of the plastic used  
in packaging will be  
either from recycled  
or biobased sources in  
2030 (we will reach  
50% by 2025).

# French curators shed light on Ukraine's contemporary art

By Alexander Query  
[query@kyivpost.com](mailto:query@kyivpost.com)

Ukraine's contemporary art scene is alive and kicking. The country has been a hotbed for avant-garde artistic minds and daring exhibitions for a few years now.

This scene attracted the attention of young French curators Sonia Gaspard and Clara Malet who set up Socle Collectif in Kyiv three years ago, a project dedicated to strengthening artistic links between France and Ukraine.

They chose social media and pop-up galleries to shed light on the emerging Ukrainian contemporary art, a scene that felt freer than what they'd seen before.

"There was a feeling of something new here," Gaspard told the Kyiv Post.

## Open scene

Gaspard, who has a background in art management, and Malet, who studied in the Ecole du Louvre to become a curator, set up two temporary exhibitions in Kyiv in April and August 2019. They were called "Uglification" and "Entropia."

"Uglification" was referring to

Socle collectif



An artist puts in place her installation for the Socle Collectif's exhibition "Entropia" which took place in Kyiv in August 2019, showcasing the new generation of Ukrainian artists.

a current trend the art curators noticed, both in France and Ukraine,

when artists intentionally go against the "good taste" in order to question

the polished modern society.

Mixing visual installations, prints,

digital art and video, they offered a platform for artists to explore the middle 1990s through the early 2000s in which Kyiv's current artist community mostly grew up.

Gaspard now lives in Russia and Malet had to come back to Paris when the global pandemic hit Ukraine, but they continue running Socle Collectif online (especially on Instagram) to show Kyiv's young art scene. Instagram is a must-have for any kind of artist today, according to them.

Kyiv is a tight cultural scene compared to Paris, Malet said, which made it easier for them to meet the country's most prominent artists.

"Every young artist knows each other here," Malet said.

Both curators found the artistic scene more united in Kyiv than in Paris, where groups of artists tend to be more separated across different art movements.

Kyiv is also more open than Berlin, they said. The German capital, where Gaspard used to live, is known for its contemporary art scene around the world, but she described it as a closed world for outsiders.

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# Top 10 books to get a grasp on Frenchness

By Alexander Query  
[query@kyivpost.com](mailto:query@kyivpost.com)

The French love to talk, but most of all, they love to write books.

Let's face it, French literature is too vast to be summed up in a top 10 list. Centuries of French authors and mountains of books make this list far from exhaustive, but these 10 books can be a good start for English readers who want to understand the French.

Here is our selection, a subjective choice in a subjective order:



## 1. "The Plague"

By Albert Camus  
Published by Vintage International (1991)

Under the strain of the global pandemic, this haunting tale of human resilience and hope in the face of the disease became once again a best-seller in France.

Albert Camus's iconic novel about an epidemic ravaging the people of a North African coastal town is a classic. Fear, isolation and claustrophobia follow as they are forced into quarantine when the disease hits the town.

Each person responds in their own way to the lethal disease: some resign themselves to fate, some seek to blame, and a few, like Dr. Rieux, resist the terror.

"The Plague" is an allegory of France under the Nazi occupation and a timeless story of bravery and determination, the story that — surprisingly — also fits well in our modern times.



## 2. "La Comedie Humaine"

By Honore de Balzac  
Published by Benediction Classics (2013)

"La Comedie Humaine" is not one book, it's a wide panorama of French society after the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815.

This massive collection of stories, novels and essays follows the arch story of characters moved by ambition in the unforgiving society of France's 19th century. It grasps every aspect of this society and reaches for the soul of what drives women and men through life in these hard times.



## 3. "The Red and the Black"

By Stendhal  
Published by Penguin Classics (2002)

"The Red and the Black" tells the story of the ambitious Julien Sorel determined to rise above his humble provincial origins to the cost of himself.

It is also a lively, satirical portrayal of the French society after the Waterloo defeat, riddled with corruption, greed, and French "ennui,"

an attitude and way of life Julien perfectly embodies.



## 4. "Aurelia"

By Gerard de Nerval  
Published by Exact Change (2004)

"Aurelia" is de Nerval's account of his descent into madness through poetry, which gives birth to sparks of literary beauty even English can convey.

"After a few minutes' lethargy, a new life begins, untrammelled by the limitations of time and space, and undoubtedly similar to that which awaits us after death," writes De Nerval about dreams in this opus.

Nerval was best known for parading a lobster on a pale blue ribbon through the gardens of the Palais-Royal in Paris, and was posthumously notorious for his suicide on a lamppost in 1855.

Beyond the trivia, Nerval was a fierce poet who paved the way for surrealism and contemporary poetry, making him one of the most influential poets in France.



## 5. "The Count of Monte Cristo"

By Alexandre Dumas  
Published by Penguin Classics (2003)

One of the most popular works of Alexandre Dumas, "The Count of Monte Cristo" stands out as a timeless tale of revenge.

Thrown in prison for a crime he did not commit, Edmond Dantes is confined to the grim fortress of If, where he learns of a treasure hidden on the Isle of Monte Cristo.

He soon becomes the Count of Monte Cristo, determined not only to escape but also to unearth the treasure and use it to plot the destruction of the three men responsible for his incarceration.



## 6. "The Venus d'Ille"

By Prosper Merimee  
Published by Hesperus Press (2004)

Best known for the story that gave birth to the famous opera "Carmen," Merimee published "La Venus d'Ille" in 1837, a short story about a statue of Venus coming to life and bringing disasters around her.

This story is one of a kind, as it is a testament to the French fantastic genre, where supernatural entities come to meddle in the life of ordinary men.

Interestingly, Merimee was in love with Ukraine to the point of speaking Ukrainian.

He even wrote an essay about the Ukrainian Hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky, and thanks to him, the French Senate even considered a petition to introduce the study of Ukrainian history in French schools but not to avail.



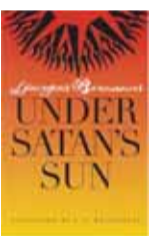
## 7. "Bonjour Tristesse"

by Françoise Sagan  
Published by Penguin Modern Classics (2013)

Sagan's amoral tale of adolescence and betrayal on the French Riviera was her masterpiece, published when she was just eighteen.

"Bonjour Tristesse" is a bittersweet tale narrated by Cecile, a seventeen-year-old girl on the brink of womanhood, whose meddling in her father's love life leads to tragic consequences.

It's a complex portrait of casual amorality and a young woman's desperate attempt to understand and control the world around her.



## 8. "Under Satan's Sun"

By George Bernanos  
Published by Bison Books (2001)

This novel follows a fervent Catholic priest, a misfit in the world and in his church, who creates scandal wherever he turns.

But his insight helps him to meet a young murderess whose destiny inexorably becomes entangled with his own.

Georges Bernanos' first novel, "Under Satan's Sun" develops the existence of evil as a spiritual force and its dramatic role in human destiny.



## 9. "Pensees"

By Blaise Pascal  
Published by Penguin Classics (1995)

"Pensees" is a collection of philosophical notes and essays in which Pascal explores the contradictions of human nature in psychological, social, metaphysical and theological terms.

Through the "Pensees," mankind emerges as a wretched creature who can be transformed through faith.

Blaise Pascal was a gifted mathematician and physicist, but this work defined French philosophy for generations after.



## 10. "Journey to the End of the Night"

By Louis-Ferdinand Celine  
Published by New Directions (2006)

Louis-Ferdinand Celine's anger at what he considered the idiocy and hypocrisy of post-war society explodes from nearly every page of this novel.

The antihero Bardamu, Celine's avatar, takes the reader with him from the trenches of World War I to the African jungle, to New York and to Detroit to meet its own destiny in Paris, where everything began and everything finishes. ☺

## RISKS OF BEING A TOP-MANAGER: PERSONAL ASSETS UNDER THREAT



Max Lebedev,  
Partner at GOLAW

The Complex and stressful work of top managers has gradually acquired an additional responsibility, which now obliges them to be even more cautious. In 2018 and 2019, many corporate lawyers and company executives closely monitored the unprecedented lawsuits filed by Russian Bank Otkritie against its ex-top managers for compensation of more than RUB 1.7 billion in losses. The court ruled for the bank. Similar disputes against top managers from time to time also occur in Europe and the United States.



Taras Lytovchenko,  
Counsel at GOLAW

It may seem that such a situation is unlikely in Ukraine. Despite the fact that civil legislation of Ukraine has for a long time stipulated that governing bodies of a legal entity must act in its interests, in good faith, reasonably and not to exceed their powers, until recently there were no direct provisions that would allow the director to be held personally liable for the obligations of the company he represents.

### What has changed in Ukraine?

With the passage of the Law on Limited and Additional Liability Companies in 2018 and Bankruptcy Procedure Code in 2019, company executives became personally liable and could

stand to lose their property. Now, any signature of the top manager can cost him not only his position in the company, but can also become a basis to sue him with a fair sum of money.

### So what do executives need to know?

In general, a director (in some cases all members of the board of directors) may be held jointly liable for the company's debts. Grounds can include misleading the owners of the company about the company's financial standing, which led to illegal dividends distribution or a failure to initiate bankruptcy procedures with the court in a timely manner after the threat of the company's insolvency appeared.

Violation of the procedure for effecting significant and related-party transactions may also be a ground for a director's liability for damages caused to the company. Debts for which the director will be liable are not limited to a specific amount or threshold, and can apply to any debt for any creditor.

If a few years ago it was quite problematic to prove the infliction of damages, now the case law is changing in favour of the company. Nowadays, judges hold the position that it is the director who should pay enough attention to all the processes that take place at the enterprise.

Another important innovation is the obligation of the director or the management board to inform the owners of the company about a decrease in the value of the company's net assets by more than 50% compared to the previous year. A violation of such an obligation, in the event of bankruptcy of the company within the next three years, entails director's subsidiary liability for the obligations of the company. Subsidiary liability means the additional liability of the director to the company's creditors in case the company is not able to fulfill all of its obligations with its own assets.

### What can an executive do to minimize the risks of liability for company's debts?

Our recommendations are quite simple:

1. To personally control key financial indicators of the company such as the value of net assets, the ratio of current assets and current liabilities or to correctly organize the distribution of this authority to other company's officials.
2. In case of reduction of net assets, convene a general meeting of participants within the period specified by law and to initiate measures to improve the financial condition of the company, to reduce authorized capital or to liquidate the company.
3. To study one's own employment contract, company charter and other internal regulations in order to understand and to comply with the limitations of authorities prescribed by law and/or by the internal documents of the company. This refers to, inter alia, significant and related-party transactions, non-disclosure and non-compete clauses, etc. Just remember that even if the charter does not directly prescribe limitations of director's powers, such limitation (and respective consequences) may still apply by virtue of the law.
4. To act instead of demurring. Reporting to the owner may potentially be an unpleasant process, but it will be even more unpleasant to be liable for the company's debts. When in doubt as to whether a company should file for bankruptcy or should convene an extraordinary meeting of shareholder, this should be done.
5. To insure the responsibility of the executive. Undeservedly uncommon in Ukraine, the institution of corporate liability insurance for officials can be a guarantee of external coverage not only of the claims from creditors, but can also serve as source of payment for legal and expert fees in the process of litigation with creditors.

The trend of increasing the responsibility of top-managers for company's debts is progressing and executives need to be prepared for significant new obligations and potential risks and, in parallel, can request higher remuneration or additional benefits for taking their role.

# Etienne de Poncins: France knows 'the problem is Russia'

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is the main request from foreign investors (who say) we will not invest a dollar or euro into this country if we can't count on a fair, competent judiciary."

The process for selecting judges needs radical improvement, he said. "If you put rotten people in an independent institution, they can demolish the democracy, as we see," the ambassador said, referring to recent Constitutional Court decisions that nullified key anti-corruption laws. Zelensky is in a standoff with the court in his efforts to remove the chief judge, Oleksandr Tupytsky, and others regarded as corrupt and even pro-Kremlin.

### Macron, Merkel & Putin

France and Germany are the mediating countries in the Normandy Four process, trying to find an end to Russia's seven-year war against Ukraine, which has left the Kremlin in control of 7 percent of Ukraine's territory, including Crimea and parts of the eastern Donbas. The conflict has killed 14,000 people and displaced 1.5 million others.

But the leaders of the two major European Union powers, Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have drawn criticism for having an online discussion on March 30 with Russian President Vladimir Putin about the situation in Ukraine without the participation of Zelensky. Critics say the three-way talk undermined Ukraine and even the European Union.

The Kyiv Post editorialized



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron (C) and Russia's President Vladimir Putin chat during a press conference after a summit on Ukraine at the Elysee Palace, in Paris, on Dec. 9, 2019. The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany haven't held a joint meeting since then.

on April 2 under the headline "Betraying Ukraine" in castigating France and Germany for the meeting. "France and Germany made fools of themselves and stepped on Ukraine's toes. But it doesn't appear that they achieved anything." The Kremlin issued a statement after the call, again blaming Ukraine for the war and provocations that have led to an escalation of fighting.

The Kyiv Post is "wrong," the ambassador said. "France is not betraying Ukraine."

Given that Germany and France

are mediators, "it's absolutely right for the two mediators to discuss with one party. We have done that with Putin and we will do the same with Zelensky. It's normal diplomatic life."

He said "it's part of our strategy to keep the line open and get a good result for Ukraine, in particular, and the Donbas. Macron could have said 'I'm fed up, we'll never sort it out.' It's not his character. He's tough and he wants to find a solution." He also said that France coordinated all moves with Ukraine and the EU, both before and after the phone call.

France and Germany, however, angered even more people by issuing a joint statement on April 3 calling on both sides to de-escalate fighting, as if Ukraine's territory was not being invaded by Russia.

Twitter outrage went along the lines of retired U.S. General Ben Hodges, who called it "one of the most pathetic statements I've ever seen. To equate the Ukrainian side with the Kremlin's aggression, by calling on both sides to 'show restraint and de-escalate' is disgusting. It's like calling on the French Maquis to de-escalate against the Wehrmacht occupiers" during World War II.

De Poncins said that the joint statement was misinterpreted and conceded that, from a Kyiv perspective, "maybe it was not clear enough."

He said the two nations meant to call on the armed forces on both sides of the war's contact line to stop shooting at each other and to resume a cease-fire reached on July 20.

However, it has been the Kremlin-backed side that has not lived up to the cease-fire and that has killed at least 28 Ukrainian soldiers, many in the last month, since the start of 2021.

Regardless, he said France is not confused about who is to blame: Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. Moreover, he said, Russia is the biggest obstacle to peace.

"The problem is Russia and the lack of willingness to move ahead," the ambassador said. "It's clear that we're frustrated by the Russian attitude. We have said that publicly many times."

Yet, in the face of Russian intransigence, France is not willing to call for tougher sanctions against the Kremlin at this time.

"It is not time to soften the sanctions for sure," de Poncins said. "To go further on sanctions is a political decision that is not under consideration at the moment."

Zelensky has been ratcheting up calls for NATO to grant Ukraine a path to membership in the political and military alliance, known as the Membership Action Plan, or MAP. In April 2008, when the issue came up at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Romania, then-U.S. President George W. Bush supported a MAP for Ukraine, but France and Germany torpedoed the idea since the now 30-member alliance makes decisions by consensus.

France doesn't appear to have changed its mind, 13 years later.

"It's too early to say," de Poncins said. "The last step was enhanced membership partner for Ukraine. Has the time come to discuss MAP now? I don't know. We do not expect a quick answer to that. We take note of the request." ❄️



## France at a glance

Government type: **Unitary republic**



President: Emmanuel Macron



Prime Minister: Jean Castex



GDP, PPP: \$2.55 trillion (2020)

GDP per capita, PPP: \$44,770 (2020)



Total area: 640,679 square kilometers



Population: 67 million

World Bank's Doing Business Ranking: 32

Credit ratings: S&P — AA (stable), Fitch — AA (negative), Moody's — Aa2 (stable)

Main economic sectors:

Nuclear power generation, agriculture, tourism, telecom, aerospace and defense, ship building, pharmaceuticals.



Trade: \$2.06 billion (2020)



Exports from Ukraine to France: Vegetable fats and oils, food waste, animal feed, fruits and berries, paper and cardboard, ores \$0.59 billion.

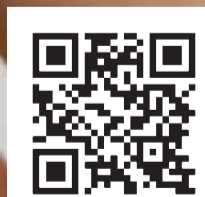
Imports to Ukraine from France: Chemical and pharmaceutical products, cars, food and beverage \$1.47 billion.



French direct investments in Ukraine in 2020 — \$845.5 million

Sources: World Bank, International Monetary Fund, State Customs Service, World Bank

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# French adventurer travels around the globe on bike, rowboat in support of war veterans

By Alexander Query  
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Gwenael Breton, 41, has the soul of a challenger.

A former soldier in French special forces, Breton devoted his life to extreme challenges after a military injury in 2012.

With his association, "Keeping the Course," he started to pedal and paddle in January 2021 for the "gueules cassees" (meaning "broken faces" in French), a nickname given to French soldiers wounded in World War I that became a symbol for all soldiers injured in military operations.

Currently in Kyiv, despite the COVID-19 crisis and closed borders, he is on his way to Vladivostok in Russia's far east. He will then cross the Pacific to San Francisco where he will meet U.S. veterans willing to follow him across the American continent and then back to France, by boat, across the Atlantic Ocean.

As an injured veteran, who dislocated his jaw and ribs after a failed parachute landing, he plans to cover almost 33,000 kilometers on a horizontal bike within a year to support and promote the cause of the war-wounded.

By doing this, he wants to show the war-wounded that they can also reach their dreams despite their injuries, Breton told the Kyiv Post. He believes everyone can relate to his adventure.

"I want to give a bit of hope to everyone wounded in life, especially in these hard times of the pandemic," he said.

## Adventure on eco bike

This is not Breton's first challenge of this kind. He already crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a rowboat in 2017, sailing from France to Guyana.

This time, he will cover 12,000 kilometers through Europe and Russia on his bike and cross 8,900



French adventurer Gwenael Breton takes a selfie in Kyiv in April 2021. A former soldier in French special forces, Breton devoted his life to extreme challenges after a military injury in 2012. Currently in Kyiv, he is on his way to North America and then back to France, by boat, across the Atlantic Ocean in a bid to help others wounded in war.

kilometers of the Pacific Ocean on a solo rowboat without stopping and without help.

Upon arrival in San Francisco, he will cross the U.S. from its west to east alongside American veterans. Then, he will cross 6,000 kilometers of the Atlantic Ocean on a rowboat in solo to reach France — all within a year.

His first goal was to raise money and open a house for the war-wounded in the south of France, but he hopes to create a global movement of solidarity with the war-wounded.

To help him accomplish this challenge, he built a horizontal bike because, otherwise, "after all these kilometers, my ass will hurt," he said.

A 116-kilogram three-wheeled

bicycle equipped with solar panels, the contraption can be used as a bed and a tent to sleep anywhere he wants.

"I sleep in my bike, so no one can steal it," he said.

By using this eco-friendly bike, he wants to promote environmentally-friendly mobility even if it takes longer than expected — a taste for endurance and innovation he got from his years in France's special forces, he said.

## Keeping course

Despite the solar panels, he still needs electricity because he began his trip in winter. It makes travel harder and slower.

Crossing borders is another challenge, especially since countries

closed their borders to fight the spread of the coronavirus at the beginning of 2020.

However, he has managed to cross most of Europe's countries without any trouble. The curiosity of custom officers helped him overcome the administrative obstacles.

He plans to pass through the cracks of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, positioning himself as a neutral ambassador of every soldier wounded in battle, whether they fight for Russia or Ukraine.

Overall, he believes his adventure can be a positive symbol of freedom for anyone willing to escape the pandemic and overcome wounds from the past. "Even when you're blocked, you have to move," he said, "because movement is life." 🇫🇷

Courtesy of Gwenael Breton



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# French BlaBlaCar proves popular with Ukrainians since 2014 entry

By Henrietta Wolter

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Seven million people in Ukraine use the French car-sharing platform BlaBlaCar, the world's leading long-distance ridesharing platform with 90 million users in 22 countries.

The platform connects people who want to travel long distance with drivers going in the same direction and Ukraine is one of the company's fastest-growing markets.

The French car-sharing service entered Ukraine in 2014 by acquiring local startup Podorozhniki, which had a similar concept to BlaBlaCar, offering inner-city and out-of-town trips, as well as commuting solutions for different companies.

Today Aleksey Lazorenko, founder of Podorozhniki, is the general manager in the Ukrainian BlaBlaCar office.

"The acquisition was a jackpot for all of us," Lazorenko says in an interview with the Kyiv Post.

Ukrainians heavily rely on the carpooling service as an alternative to expensive train tickets or to owning a private car. Demand has increased steadily over the years, not counting the pandemic-stricken 2020.

## Post-Soviet country

The merger between BlaBlaCar and Podorozhniki did not go off without a few difficulties. The negotiation



BlaBlaCar Ukraine general manager Aleksey Lazorenko talks with the Kyiv Post on March 11, 2021. The French car-sharing service entered Ukraine in 2014 by acquiring local startup Podorozhniki. Ukrainians heavily rely on the carpooling service as an alternative to expensive train tickets or owning a private car.

process took nine months. Cultural differences played a role.

"There were really a lot of stereotypes about post-Soviet people, that we are quite closed off and have this bad mood," Lazorenko says.

He had to explain to his French

partners that the younger generation in Ukraine is much closer to the average person in Europe than their parents were, especially in the age of global connectivity.

"We are open to share our car seats with strangers," he says.

It was BlaBlaCar's first acquisition outside the European Union. Today Ukraine and Russia are the company's fastest growing markets.

On the customer side, there is only one real difference between French and Ukrainian people, according to Lazorenko: "People here are really last minute."

When planning their trips through BlaBlaCar's platform, customers from countries like France, Spain or Germany always schedule their rides at least three or four days in advance.

In Ukraine, drivers as well as people who are looking for a ride, often publish it on the same day.

Lazorenko's hypothesis is that higher levels of instability and uncertainty on the macro-level of a country means higher uncertainty on the micro-level.

## Working for the French

The BlaBlaCar team is international. It consists of 700 people with 35 different nationalities, according to its homepage.

"I would not really say that BlaBlaCar is a French company, we are a global company, we work in a team with people from all over the world, from Ukraine, from Poland, from France, from Spain," says Lazorenko.

He says that during a normal working week, BlaBlaCar Ukraine staffers talk to their international colleagues at least four times.

"Once you start to discuss your processes with people in Paris or in Poland, you realize that your view is actually quite narrow, and you start observing yourself from the outside," he says.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole team would meet in Paris once a year to discuss new ideas and strategies.

Lazorenko said he enjoys working with BlaBlaCar because of the trust and transparency ingrained in the company's culture. He also found

the flat hierarchy to be different from his experience with Ukrainian companies.

"In BlaBlaCar, we really have a horizontal structure... and that is amazing, because everyone in the team feels equal," he says.

In the beginning, Lazorenko needed some time to overcome his shyness, saying that European people are more open.

Also, he cannot always keep up physically with his French colleagues.

"Probably this is not really about French people and France in general but about the team there... they presented a really impressive amount of physical power to combine fun with serious stuff," he says.

"We go to bars and restaurants and have really a lot of fun until late at night. In the morning, from 9:30 we discuss very difficult things. But I can't be like that, I need some time to recover."

The motto "Fun & Serious" is one of the core values of BlaBlaCar.

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted people's ability to visit each other and took a toll on transport services like BlaBlaCar.

In France, BlaBlaCar had to shut down its service completely during the first lockdown in March 2020. The Ukrainian branch could still operate in a limited way and even experienced a peak in demand.

"During the lockdown people realized they need to get somewhere, (after) people reached their destinations, the spike disappeared and we had more or less normal activities with a little decrease throughout the year," Lazorenko says.

The company cannot disclose exact numbers but the drop of activity in France was much higher than in Ukraine because of different approaches on the pandemic.

## Sharing successfully

BlaBlaCar acquired Podorozhniki when Lazorenko and his team of three were on the search for investors to grow their startup, which was operating in Russia and Ukraine.

One day a big investor introduced the two companies to each other.

"I went to Paris for the first negotiations... and we realized that we are fully on the same page," Lazorenko tells.

Today the Ukrainian office counts more than 70 employees.

At the end of 2019, BlaBlaCar Ukraine went beyond sharing trips with passengers and acquired Busfor, the largest aggregator of bus routes in post-Soviet countries, including in Ukraine.

Since February 2020, BlaBlaCar users can find and book convenient trips with fellow passengers or buy tickets for official bus lines in Ukraine and abroad.

The aim of BlaBlaCar is to have no empty seats in cars on the street, connecting people and contributing to the environment.

"It is a global trend of sharing economy which is really growing fast and really has a lot of sense concerning global warming, and not very normal consumption of resources of our planet," Lazorenko says.

"I am really happy that Ukraine accepted the idea of BlaBlaCar, of sharing." 🇺🇦



## French Spring big opening in Kharkiv

For the first time in 17 years, the French Spring festival opening moved from Kyiv to Kharkiv because of the coronavirus lockdown in the Ukrainian capital. The festival that promotes French culture kicked off on March 25 with a performance by French cellist Gautier Capuçon at the Kharkiv Philharmonic. The program features outdoor events and online films through mid-June, when the closing ceremony takes place on St. Sophia Square. Check details at [www.printempsfrançais.com.ua](http://www.printempsfrançais.com.ua)



# French curators highlight local avant-garde artistic minds

page 8 →

"In Berlin, everybody keeps their contact for themselves," Gaspard said.

In Kyiv, in turn, she had the opportunity to meet numerous artists easily. One of them was Sasha Kurmaz, a 34-year-old street artist and photographer who explores the links between individuals, society and the state, and is also well known in France, Gaspard said.

Their encounter resulted in Kurmaz' engagement in the "Uglification" exhibition, through which the artist showcased prints and photographs.

## No money

While the Ukrainian art scene is more open than anywhere else, it is poor. The state doesn't finance the industry, which leads to economic instability for both artists and art spaces.

Before the pandemic closed art galleries in France, French artists could potentially live from their art through public finances and useful contacts in the art market, allowing them to easily sell their works given

they have a good reputation.

"Art became a job in France," Malet said.

Ukrainian artists don't have the luxury of subvention, and for Gaspard, it hampers the scene. The curator said that the lack of money reduces the number of artists. The only people able to create all day must be wealthy.

Both concurred it was the same in France a century ago. It might change, they said, but the evolution of the art market is hard to predict in Ukraine.

At the same time, surprisingly, there's a positive thing about poverty of the art scene. It leads to more creativity among some artists, because they don't rely on money to create. It also gives them more freedom, because they are not forced to produce for art patrons.

Contemporary Ukrainian art is about autodidacts with no connections on the art market. Young artists often already have a job and see art as a passion to share, Malet said.

## Trends

The Ukrainian identity, the sev-



Socle collectif

Art piece picked up from the online portfolio of Socle Collectif. Instagram and social media are crucial for any kind of artist today, French curators Sonia Gaspard and Clara Malet told the Kyiv Post.

en-year ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine that started in 2014, the reinvention of the outdated Soviet aesthetic and the issue of the LGBTQ rights are recurrent topics among Ukrainian artists.

But they don't constitute trends so far. It's too early to grasp and predict artistic tendencies in Ukraine because the market is still young, the

curators said. Art historians need at least 10 years and a bit of distance to outline artistic trends in a cultural scene, according to Malet.

"It's a tough question because it's too early to answer," Malet said.

Both curators plan to continue to closely monitor the scene in Ukraine and extend their project in Central Europe, including Prague where

both already have connections.

They also think about organizing exhibitions in France and invite the artists they met in Ukraine to engage in the artistic scene of Paris.

"Pandemic aside, it worked so well in Kyiv that we feel it will be harder to find the same excitement to organize events in Paris," Malet said. "But we'd love to try." 🇫🇷



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# Putin's friends in France work against Ukraine

By Alexander Query  
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Russian President Vladimir Putin can count on many supporters in France, even at the highest level of politics.

Some French public figures can be counted on to spread the Kremlin's message, damaging France's credibility as an impartial ally in the Normandy Format peace talks in which the nation, along with Germany, are mediators seeking to end Russia's war against Ukraine.

Putin's friends undermine France's foreign policy in Ukraine, which is to seek a way to end the Kremlin's war and get Crimea and the Russian-controlled parts of the eastern Donbas back under Ukraine's control. The ongoing seven-year war has killed more than 13,000 people.

From both the political left and right, whether motivated by money or shared values with the Russian dictator, these Kremlin-friendly French regularly push Moscow's propaganda and agenda.

Here are some of the more prominent Putin cronies in France:

## Le Pen and her niece

The most prominent supporters are the Le Pen family who is leading the anti-immigration National Rally formerly known as the National Front.

Le Pen's platform, which is also anti-European Union, appeals to the Kremlin's incessant posturing as a defender of conservative values.

Marine Le Pen, as well as her niece, Marion-Marechal, are both fervent loyalists of Putin. They have visited Moscow for high-level talks numerous times.

She is a serious contender for the presidency, with polls showing she could be French President Emmanuel Macron. The National Rally has only eight seats in the French parliament, but claims 22 out of 74 French seats in the European Parliament. Some of her support comes from anger over Macron's mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Marine Le Pen said that Crimea "has always been Russian" and vehemently denied any invasion had taken place. Instead, she claimed a "coup d'état" in Ukraine resulted in a transfer of power.



Hubert Vedrine shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin. For Vedrine, France's foreign minister from 1997 to 2002, France and the West are to blame for the tense relationship with Russia. He supported French President Emmanuel Macron's attempt to open his arms to Putin in 2019.

In 2018, she went as far as calling Russia "a great, safe, modern country and a democracy" during an interview on French radio.

She has also promised to work to repeal the EU sanctions on Moscow over Crimea and pledged to recognize the peninsula as part of Russia if she's elected.

Such public positions helped Le Pen secure an \$11 million loan from a Russian bank in September 2014 to finance the party ahead of the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections, a loan for which the party is being sued because it still didn't pay it back.

Le Pen's party allegedly looked for Putin's financial support because French banks had refused to lend money to the political party, which is stained by its xenophobic reputation.

## Thierry Mariani

A French lawmaker at the European



Marine Le Pen (L) and her niece Marion-Marechal are both fervent loyalists of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Marine Le Pen said that Crimea "has always been Russian."

Parliament on behalf of the National Rally, Mariani made headlines in 2016 when he visited Russian-occupied Crimea and hugged a stat-

ue dedicated to Russian troops in Sevastopol.

It wasn't his first trip to Crimea nor his last, as he came back there last year with a delegation of French lawmakers supporting Putin.

He always supported the annexation, saying "Crimea is Russian, let's move on and try to regain normal relations between European countries and Russia," during a press conference in Sevastopol in 2016.

Despite being a mouthpiece for Moscow, in September 2020, Mariani was appointed member of the European Parliament's special committee on "foreign interference in all democratic processes of the European Union, including disinformation" — a committee ironically designed to counter the information war carried out by the Kremlin.



French lawmaker Thierry Mariani holds a matryoshka doll. He supports the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and urged European countries to restore normal relations with Russia.



Jean-Luc Melenchon believes that France should leave NATO, form an alliance with Moscow.



Former head of French intelligence services Alain Juillet works at Moscow's Russia Today mouthpiece.

## Jean-Luc Melenchon

Putin has friends everywhere on the French political spectrum.

Melenchon, the leader of far-left party La France Insoumise, multiplies statements in favor of Moscow.

As a potential candidate for next year's presidential elections, he has released his defense plan, which includes an exit from NATO and a new alliance with Moscow because "the Russians are reliable partners while the United States is not."

Melenchon's anti-capitalism and hate of the U.S. push him into the arms of the Kremlin, following the tradition of France's far-left leaders since the creation of the Communist Party in France, which became Joseph Stalin's antenna after the war.

He also recommends that the French government buy Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, rather than Pfizer, produced in the U.S.

This is not new for Melenchon, who was one of the only French lawmakers in Moscow on May 8, 2018 to celebrate the end of the "Great Patriotic War" alongside Putin.

## Hubert Vedrine

Hubert Vedrine, former foreign minister of France from 1997 to 2002, published a book in February where he outlined his vision of geopolitics.

In this book, Vedrine gives Russia the sympathy he has endlessly repeated in the French media since he left office. For Vedrine, Russia is the West's easy target.

According to him, there is no reason to fight today Russia as it's "less bad and much less powerful than the USSR was in the days of the Cold War, at a time when it was assassinating way more opponents."

He also sweeps Kremlin opposition leader Alexei Navalny's arrest under the rug, as "the West no longer has a monopoly on power and the hierarchy of values."

For him, France and the West share the blame for the tense relationship with Russia. He supported French President Emmanuel Macron's attempt to open his arms to Putin in 2019.

"We need to reinvent our relationship with Russia," he said back then.

## Alain Juillet

Alain Juillet, former head of Intelligence at the DGSE, French foreign intelligence services, was recruited by Moscow's mouthpiece Russia Today in 2020 to host a geopolitics program twice a month on the French branch of the channel.

Launched at the end of 2017, RT France had already recruited the former host of France Televisions, Frederic Taddei, a well-known public figure who said at the time he didn't "care where the money came from."

Juliet's recruitment is more problematic than Taddei's because Juillet had access to sensitive files throughout his career in the French secret service, which makes him a particularly useful asset in Russia's information war against the West. 🇷🇺

# These are 'top 10 smugglers' sanctioned by Security Council

By Oleksiy Sorokin  
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President Volodymyr Zelensky's new habit of using the National Security and Defense Council for fast decisions took a new turn on April 2, when the council went after smugglers.

The council imposed sanctions against 10 Ukrainian citizens he said were the country's top smugglers.

"Contraband is economic terrorism against Ukraine," said Zelensky on April 2, explaining the decision. "According to expert calculations, Ukraine has lost Hr 300 billion (\$11 billion) from smuggling."

The sanctions are a way to overcome the inaction of the courts and parliament. After Zelensky's earlier sanctions against pro-Kremlin lawmakers, Zelensky now turns his attention to lawbreakers, like those using the country's rotten customs for personal gain.

But there is a catch. By law, Ukrainian citizens can be sanctioned by the Security Council sanctions only in case of terrorism. While smuggling is illegal, it's not terrorism.

By bypassing the law, Zelensky risks going too far. While Ukrainians, tired of inactivity, have come to enjoy the president's attacks against Ukraine's untouchables, new sanctions come at the cost of institutional erosion and open the door to future abuse.

"The biggest risk now is that each next president can do the same," says Anatoly Ohtsyyuk, a political expert at local think tank Democracy House.

Among the 10 most recently sanctioned Ukrainians, the best known are Odesa-native Vadym Alperin and Orest Firmaniuk, from Zakarpattia Oblast, who were named Ukraine's top smugglers in the past. They denied it.

The names of an additional four, Valery Peresolyak, Volodymyr Didukh, Yuriy Kushnir and Oleksandr Chudakov, have often appeared in local media linking them to smuggling.

The rest, Ivan Bokalo, Oleksandr Yermchuk, Viktor Sherman and Oleksandr Kravchenko are not widely known.

All of them are shying away from press appearances. None have commented about sanctions.

As a result of sanctions, the accounts and assets of all 10 are frozen for three years. They are also banned from conducting any business in Ukraine.

The Security Council also removed over 100 Ukrainian Custom Service officials from office.

## Godfathers of contraband

Ukraine is a big country, full of opportunities for smugglers. Its 5,638-kilometer land border adjoins seven countries. Ukraine also has several large seaports, the biggest being in Odesa, a city of 1 million people on the Black Sea coast.

Influential groups use the land borders and ports to make billions by smuggling raw material and cheap goods out of the country. They make additional cash by ille-



The Security Service of Ukraine arrested a transnational organized group that specialized in smuggling and selling wholesale consignments of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances in Kyiv on March 14, 2020.

Security Service of Ukraine

gally shipping goods into Ukraine, evading customs and taxes.

Ukrainian customs officers and top officials take part in these schemes.

Out of those sanctioned by Zelensky, two names stand out — Alperin and Firmaniuk. Both have been named "king of contraband" in the past.

Doing business since the mid-1990s, Alperin first popped up in the media in 2008 when his ship, Faina, was captured by Somali pirates.

The ship was transporting arms from Ukraine to Kenya. It was reported that Alperin paid \$3.5 million for the ship's release.

In 2017, Alperin was named as a major importer of goods from China, he also was sometimes referred to as an Odesa-based construction mogul.

The same year, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) began investigating Alperin for a potential evasion of taxes and customs. He was soon charged with the creation of an organized crime group that included customs officers in Odesa and Kyiv.

NABU accused Alperin of costing the state Hr 77 million (\$2.8 million) in taxes. Soon Alperin was arrested for bribing a NABU detective. He was released on bail.

In 2019, Zelensky called Alperin the "godfather of contraband," after NABU arrested the deputy head of the Kyiv customs department linked to Alperin. Both remain on bail.

Firmaniuk has a similar life story.

In 2019, then-head of Ukraine's Customs Service Maxym Nefyodov, in an interview to Bihus.info, named Firmaniuk and Alperin as the top smugglers in Ukraine.

Viktor Sherman, who was also sanctioned by Zelensky, was also on that list. Ukrainian media have reported that he is the business partner of Alperin.

Firmaniuk calls himself a customs broker, who uses "tax optimization" to import goods into Ukraine. The so-called optimization is a scheme by which iPhones are imported as iPhone parts and clothes are imported as threads, allowing a lower customs fee to be paid at the border.

Although this is illegal, Firmaniuk was never charged.

## Low-profile brokers

The other seven people sanctioned by Zelensky have rarely made national headlines.

One notable exception is Peresolyak, who owns Minaj soccer club, which entered Ukraine's Premier League for the first time in 2020.

Minaj is a suburb of Uzhhorod, a small regional capital on the border with Slovakia and Hungary. Peresolyak has been called the main smuggler of Zakarpattia Oblast.

Peresolyak worked in Zakarpattia's customs service for over 10 years, peaking as the deputy head of one of the departments. After leaving civil service, Peresolyak had 13 plots of land, several houses and a soccer club. Ukrainian media reported that he maintained leverage on the local customs.

Another local star is Kushnir from Chernivtsi Oblast which borders Romania. Kushnir was credited with inventing a scheme where locals would travel by foot over the border carrying several blocks of cigarettes. They would do so multiple times

daily. The cigarettes would bypass customs in Romania and would be shipped by trucks to the European markets.

The cost of a pack of cigarettes in Ukraine is \$2 on average. In Europe, the price can peak at \$8–10 a pack.

The most interesting individual sanctioned by Zelensky is Didukh, who has been referred to in Ukrainian media as a Lviv-based crime boss. He survived at least three assassination attempts and is credited with having interests in smuggling raw materials from Ukraine.

Odesa-based Chudakov is the only one on the list (besides Alperin), who has been charged by the prosecution.

Chudakov is one of the five people charged in a corruption scheme involving Dmytro Holovin, the former head of Odesa's police. The scheme centers around a group of police officers, who sold confiscated cigarettes through Chudakov.

## Legal dilemma

Zelensky's earlier decision to use the Security Council to defend Ukraine from Kremlin proxies was well-received by political observers and activists.

Now, many have raised questions about where this may eventually lead.

"We're talking about a mechanism that's instant, doesn't require a formal investigation and doesn't need to go through court," Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Penta Center for Political Studies, told the Kyiv Post in late March after the Security Council imposed yet another round of sanctions.

At the time, there was a consensus among experts that Zelensky would stay within the law. Now, this notion is gone.

According to Ukrainian law, only people who took part in terrorism can be sanctioned by the Security Council. Another Ukrainian law specifically lists activities that are considered terrorism.

Smuggling outside the eastern conflict zone isn't one of them.

Zelensky's office declined to comment on what grounds the sanctions were imposed.

This is not the first time Zelensky bypasses the law and it doesn't look like he's ready to stop.

On March 27, Zelensky signed a decree to sack Oleksandr Tupytsky, head of the country's Constitutional Court, who's been involved in the scandal regarding the annulment of anti-corruption legislation.

Tupytsky's sacking was demanded since late October, when the Constitutional Court, under Tupytsky, effectively eliminated Ukraine's system of asset declarations for public officials.

However, Zelensky doesn't have the authority to fire a Constitutional Court judge.

"Zelensky set a precedent," says Democracy House's Ohtsyyuk.

According to Ohtsyyuk, Zelensky wants to see quick results, especially when Ukrainian institutions, such as courts, law enforcement and parliament, are failing. Yet there are no checks and balances on the president, making future abuse more likely.

"In Ukraine, if you have power, you're above the law," he says. ☪

# Putin a killer? Let us count the ways

By Kyiv Post

When U.S. President Joe Biden agreed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a “killer” in an interview in March, he was admitting the obvious.

Yet Western leaders are rarely so matter-of-fact towards Russian leaders, even during the Cold War.

But the facts are difficult to ignore: Putin’s regime is soaked in blood. Since 1999, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin tapped him as prime minister, Putin has unleashed a killing spree in Russia and abroad, including Ukraine and Syria. He is even implicated in assassinations of targets in the West.

When his victims are counted, Putin isn’t just a killer, but rather a mass murderer. Putin-led invasions and mercenary attacks have killed tens of thousands of people.

## Death toll

About 80,000 people, including up to 25,000 civilians, were killed in the Second Chechen War. Russia’s war against Ukraine, launched in 2014, has claimed the lives of more than 13,000 people, including 3,350 civilians.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also attributes 83,500 civilian deaths to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad’s regime and its allies, including Russia. An estimated 600,000 people have been killed in the decade-long Syrian Civil War.



This photo shows a destroyed airport building in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk, on February 26, 2015. Russia and its proxies are responsible for military aggression against Ukraine and war crimes, including indiscriminate bombing, extrajudicial executions and torture of prisoners.

Some of Putin’s critics have also accused him of killing his own people: Namely, orchestrating the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia, which killed 307 people.

There is evidence that Putin also ordered the assassinations of some of his personal opponents, 20 of whom were either killed or died in suspicious circumstances. Some of the murders involved the use of chemical and radiological weapons – something that blatantly violates not only multiple countries’ criminal

codes but also international law.

In Russia, Putin has built a dictatorship and jailed numerous critics. Currently the Kremlin has at least 74 political prisoners in jail, as well as 304 people imprisoned for their religious beliefs, according to the Memorial human rights group.

But so far the West has been reluctant to antagonize Putin.

Biden’s remark represents a rare exception in an international community that generally treats him as a normal head of state. Instead

of holding him accountable for his crimes, Western leaders choose appeasement.

“There is an ambiguous attitude towards Putin (in the West),” Ukrainian political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko told the Kyiv Post. “They don’t like him and believe him to be a murderer but, on the other hand, they have a pragmatic approach: They believe it’s better to negotiate with him to keep him from crossing the line.”

Putin has denied the accusations of murders, war crimes and corruption. But a look at his 21-year rule provides plenty of evidence of his atrocities.

## The rise

According to his critics, Putin’s authoritarian mindset and Soviet nostalgia are deeply rooted in his work at the KGB – the secret police responsible for jailing and killing millions of Soviet citizens.

Putin joined the KGB in 1975, at the age of 23. According to murdered ex-KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko and human rights lawyer Yuliy Rybakov, Putin fought against Soviet dissidents at the KGB. Putin denies this.

From 1985 to 1990, Putin served as a KGB officer in Dresden, East Germany. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, he was involved in a standoff with German protesters who tried to take over the KGB headquarters in Dresden. He burned KGB documents in an apparent effort to cover up the secret police’s crimes in East Germany.

After returning to Russia, he got a prominent post in his hometown, St. Petersburg. In 1991-1996, Putin was the head of the city’s foreign affairs committee and a close ally of Anatoly Sobchak, then a liberal mayor. At the time, Putin adapted to the new political atmosphere by claiming to be a democrat.

In 1992, Marina Salje, a member of the St. Petersburg city council, launched an official investigation into Putin’s alleged corrupt dealings. Putin’s department unlawfully hand-picked companies without tenders, and there was evidence of kickbacks, according to Salje’s findings. Israeli businessman Maxim Freidzon said in a 2017 interview that he had given

a bribe to Putin in the early 1990s.

But the investigation led nowhere, and Putin’s rise continued.

Sobchak lost a mayoral election in 1996 and Putin moved to Moscow and became the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the KGB’s successor, in 1998.

At the time, ailing and unpopular President Boris Yeltsin and his inner circle were looking for someone to succeed him, someone who could guarantee that they could keep their assets and remain immune from prosecution. Putin was chosen for the job and appointed as prime minister in August 1999 and acting president in December 1999.

At the same time, Chechen rebels invaded the nearby republic of Dagestan, and Russia sent troops to Chechnya.

## Apartment bombings

In September 1999, terrorists blew up apartment blocks in Moscow and two other Russian cities, killing 307 people. According to Russian courts, the terrorist attacks were organized by Chechen-based Arab Islamists and carried out by 18 people – mostly from the North Caucasus.

The attacks dramatically boosted social support for the war in Chechnya and helped Putin be elected president in 2000.

At the time of the attacks, the police said it had found sacks with hexogen, an explosive, and a detonator in an apartment building in the city of Ryazan. Media said FSB employees had put the explosive in the building but the FSB claimed it was a training exercise and the sacks were filled with sugar, not hexogen.

In 2002 former KGB and FSB officer Litvinenko published a book called “Blowing Up Russia,” in which he accused Putin and the FSB of orchestrating the apartment bombings to propel Putin to power. This version does not have unanimous support among Putin’s critics: Some back it, while others dismiss it as a conspiracy theory.

Liberal politician Sergei Yushchenkov and member of parliament Yury Shchekochikhin were key members of an independent commission that tried to investigate the terrorist attacks, including the allegations of the FSB’s involvement. Both of them were assassinated in 2003, while a lawyer hired by the commission to investigate the attacks, Mikhail Trepashkin, was jailed.

In 2006 Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium-210, a radioactive component of nuclear weapons, in London.

The British police charged Andrei Lugovoi, a former KGB officer and current pro-Kremlin lawmaker, and businessman Dmitry Kovtun with murdering Litvinenko. In 2016, a British court concluded that Putin and Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the FSB, “probably” ordered Litvinenko’s assassination.

## Chechen war

The war with Chechnya helped Putin come to power and cement his authoritarian rule.

Up to 25,000 civilians were killed during the Second Chechen war in 1999-2009, according to Amnesty

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Russian tanks move along a street as children play with a toy truck in Tskhinvali in the Georgian region of South Ossetia on Aug. 30, 2008. Russian troops invaded Georgia and occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another Georgian region.

## Killer? No, mass murderer best describes Putin

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International. Russian troops targeted civilians in indiscriminate bomb attacks and took part in several massacres of civilians.

According to Amnesty International, thousands may be buried in unmarked graves in Chechnya, including up to 5,000 civilians who disappeared during the war. The bodies show signs of executions and torture.

Human Rights Watch classified the forced disappearances as crimes against humanity.

During the war, Russia also set up a system of concentration camps in Chechnya, called "filtration camps." According to the Memorial human rights group, 200,000 people passed through the camps and were subjected to beatings and torture, and some were summarily executed.

### Killing off democracy

Since coming to power in 1999, Putin has never yielded. After his first two presidential terms expired in 2008, he installed his friend Dmitry Medvedev as a puppet president and became prime minister.

In 2012 he returned as president, claiming that the constitutional ban on a third term applied only to consecutive terms. Independent lawyers have disputed the claim, arguing that Putin's third presidential term was unlawful and unconstitutional. In 2020 Putin got rid of term limits for himself altogether by changing the constitution through a rigged referendum.

According to independent election observers, there is overwhelming evidence that vote rigging has dramatically increased in Russian elections since 2000.

Although he started his presidency with some free market reforms, Putin has since gradually gotten rid of most democratic institutions, jailed his political opponents and eliminated civil liberties.

The turning point was 2003, when Putin's opponent and oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky was jailed on tax evasion charges. His Yukos oil firm was sold through a rigged auction and taken over by state oil firm Rosneft, which was run by Putin's friends.

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## Putin's critics end up poisoned, killed

By Kyiv Post

Since coming to power, Vladimir Putin has shown he's got no qualms about assassinating critics.

His most prominent foe is Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who has exposed the corruption of Putin and his inner circle for more than a decade.

Navalny and his party have been banned from running in elections, had their bank accounts frozen and were hit with crippling fines and arrests. But the final reckoning came when Navalny was poisoned in Russia in August 2020.

He was flown for treatment to Germany when he was in a coma. German doctors, as well as several independent labs in Europe, said that he had been poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent – a chemical weapon produced by the Russian government.

In December the Insider, Bellingcat, CNN and Der Spiegel published an investigation according to which Navalny had been poisoned by agents of Russia's Federal Security Service and identified their names.

To prove their assertions, they obtained data on the alleged murderers' travel and mobile phone data. A special chemical substances unit of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) had been following Navalny for years, including during his trip to Siberia when the assassination attempt took place.

Navalny impersonated a Russian state official to speak to one of the members of the alleged poisoning team, Konstantin Kudryavtsev, in December. Kudryavtsev admitted that he had taken part in the poisoning operation and said that the poison had been put in Navalny's underwear.

Putin has admitted that the FSB squad had been conducting surveillance on Navalny but denied that they were supposed to kill him.

Navalny's poisoning evokes parallels with another murder attempt involving Novichok.

In 2018 former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and



Russian police investigators check the body of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was killed near the Kremlin in Moscow on Feb. 28, 2015. Nemtsov is among about 20 other critics of dictator Vladimir Putin who have been murdered or died in suspicious circumstances.

his daughter Yulia were poisoned with a Novichok agent in Salisbury, U.K., but survived. Dawn Sturgess, a British citizen, accidentally came into contact with the poison and died as a result.

British authorities identified Russian military intelligence agents Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Bashirov as suspects in the unprecedented use of chemical warfare on British soil.

The same FSB squad that allegedly tried to kill Navalny had also trailed three other people before they were found dead with signs of poisoning, including syringe pricks, in 2014 to 2019, according to a January investigation by Bellingcat, the Insider and Der Spiegel.

They are Timur Kuashev, a journalist and human rights activist from the Caucasus; Ruslan Magomedragimov, a Lezgin nationalist activist from the Russian republic of Dagestan, and Nikita Isayev, the leader of a minor party called New Russia and an aide to pro-Kremlin politician Sergei Mironov.

The FSB poisoning team also followed liberal politician Vladimir Kara-Murza when he was poisoned in 2015 and then again in 2017, although he survived, Bellingcat, the Insider and Der Spiegel reported in February.

In the run-up to his first poisoning, Kara-Murza had been lobbying for U.S. sanctions against Putin's regime jointly with liberal politician Boris Nemtsov.

Nemtsov himself was shot dead next to the Kremlin on Feb. 27, 2015. He was killed hours after promoting a march against Russia's war in Ukraine.

In 2017 a fighter at the Sever battalion of Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, a loyalist of Putin, was convicted for Nemtsov's murder.

Two other critics of Putin – columnist Yulia Latynina and activist Pyotr Verzilov – survived poisoning attempts in 2017-2018.

Investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya who wrote about Russia's war in Chechnya and criticized Putin, also survived a poisoning attempt in 2004, when she was flying from Moscow to Rostov-on-Don. She was later murdered in her building's elevator in 2006.

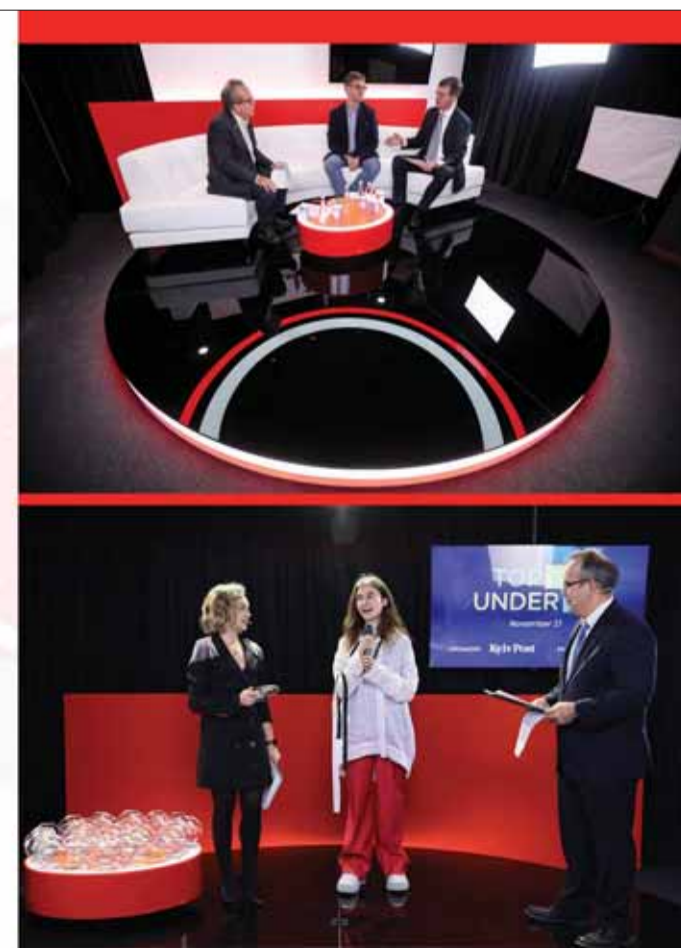
Putin's regime also used more exotic ways to eliminate opponents. In 2006, former KGB and FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko, who accused Putin of orchestrating the murders of hundreds of people, was poisoned with polonium-210, a radioactive material. A British court concluded in 2016 that Putin ordered the assassination.

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# West does little to punish Putin's murderous ways

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## Georgia war

As Putin monetized his immense power, he also is pursuing his dream of resurrecting the Soviet empire. His military invasions of Georgia and

Ukraine were violations of international law.

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and occupied two of its breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russian troops attacked fleeing

## Critics of Vladimir Putin who were murdered, died suspiciously or poisoned

<b>Vladimir Golovlyov</b> member of parliament	shot dead on on Aug. 21, 2002
<b>Sergey Yushenkov</b> opposition politician	shot down on April 17, 2003
<b>Yury Shchekochikhin</b> member of parliament	died mysteriously with signs of poisoning on July 3, 2003
<b>Anna Politkovskaya</b> journalist	shot dead on Oct. 7, 2006
<b>Alexander Litvinenko</b> ex-KGB officer	died due to polonium poisoning on Nov. 23, 2006 in the UK
<b>Stanislav Markelov</b> human rights lawyer	shot dead on Jan. 19, 2009
<b>Anastasia Baburova</b> journalist	shot dead in central Moscow on Jan. 19, 2009.
<b>Natalya Estemirova</b> human rights lawyer	shot down on July 15, 2009
<b>Sergei Magnitsky</b> lawyer	died in jail on Nov. 16, 2009 due to abuse by prison officials
<b>Alexander Perepilichny</b> businessman and whistleblower	died due to poisoning on Nov. 10, 2012
<b>Boris Berezovsky</b> oligarch	found hanged in his bathroom in the UK on March 23, 2013
<b>Timur Kuashev</b> human rights activist	found dead with signs of poisoning on July 31, 2014 after being followed by an FSB poisoning squad
<b>Boris Nemtsov</b> opposition politician	shot dead on Feb. 27, 2015
<b>Ruslan Magomedragimov</b> Lezgin nationalist activist from Caucasus	found dead on March 24, 2015 after being followed by an FSB poisoning squad
<b>Vladimir Kara-Murza</b> opposition politician	survived poisoning attempts on May 26, 2015 and Feb. 2, 2017 after being followed by an FSB poisoning squad
<b>Sergei Mokhov</b> anthropologist and associate of opposition leader Alexei Navalny	survived a poisoning attempt on Nov. 25, 2016
<b>Denis Voronenkov</b> member of parliament	shot dead in Ukraine on March 23, 2017
<b>Yulia Latynina</b> columnist and writer	survived an attack with a pungent type of gas on July 19, 2017
Former intelligence officer <b>Sergei Skripal</b> and his daughter <b>Yulia Skripal</b>	survived a Novichok poisoning attempt on March 4, 2018 in the UK
<b>Dawn Sturgess</b> British citizen	accidentally came into contact with the poison and died as a result of the attack on the Skripals on March 4, 2018
Journalist <b>Orkhan Dzhemal</b> , film director <b>Alexander Rastorguyev</b> , cameraman <b>Kirill Radchenko</b>	killed in the Central African Republic on July 30, 2018 while investigating Russian military contractors and the business of a Putin associate in the country
<b>Pyotr Verzilov</b> opposition activist	survived a poisoning attempt on Sept. 12, 2018
<b>Nikita Isayev</b> politician	died on Nov. 16, 2019 after being followed by an FSB poisoning squad
<b>Alexei Navalny</b> opposition leader	survived a Novichok poisoning attempt on Aug. 20, 2020 after being followed by an FSB poisoning squad, later jailed on trumped-up charges



Chechen refugees try to warm themselves while selling some food in a refugee camp on the Chechen-Ingush border, near the village of Slepsovskaya, on Jan. 6, 2000, during the Second Chechen War. About 80,000 people, including up to 25,000 civilians, were killed in the war.

civilians, bombed civilian population centers and used cluster bombs. Amnesty International accused Russia of deliberately killing civilians, which is a war crime. A total of 228 Georgian civilians were killed.

Russia and its proxies were also engaged in plundering, kidnappings and ethnic cleansing.

### War with Ukraine

In 2014, Putin also illegally invaded and then annexed Ukraine's Crimea – another violation of international law – and launched a military invasion of eastern Ukraine.

Russia and its proxies have been involved in extrajudicial executions and torture of prisoners in Ukraine, according to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Russian mercenary Arseniy Pavlov admitted to killing 15 prisoners in a recorded interview by phone with the Kyiv Post in 2015.

"I don't give a fuck about what I am accused of, believe it or not. I shot 15 prisoners dead. I don't give a fuck. No comment. I kill if I want to. I don't if I don't," he said.

Human rights groups have also documented indiscriminate bombing, including the use of cluster bombs, by Russia and its proxies.

Russia's war against Ukraine has claimed the lives of about 13,000 people, including 3,350 civilians, according to the United Nations.

### Murder in the sky

Another crime for which Putin's regime remains unpunished is the downing of Malaysia Airlines' flight MH17 on July 17, 2014 in eastern Ukraine. All 283 passengers, most of them Dutch citizens, and 15 crew were killed.

In 2016 the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team concluded that the aircraft had been shot down by a Russian Buk missile fired from an area controlled by Russian proxies. It also found the Buk missile system

used in the attack had been transported from Russia into Ukraine on the day of the crash, and then back into Russia after the crash, with one fewer missile.

The Buk came from the Russian 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade in Kursk, according to the investigation team. The Netherlands and Australian foreign ministers stated that they would hold Russia legally responsible for the crash.

In 2019 Dutch prosecutors charged four people, including three Russian citizens and one Ukrainian, with shooting down the airliner. One of them is Igor Girkin, a former Russian FSB officer who took part in the annexation of Crimea and triggered Russia's war against Ukraine by seizing the city of Sloviansk in Donetsk Oblast in 2014.

Girkin was unrepentant when he admitted in 2014 to pulling the trigger on Russia's war.

"If our team had not crossed the border (into Ukraine's Donbas from Russia), everything would have ended in the same way as in Kharkiv and Odesa," he said. "There would have been several dozens of killed and detained people, and (the conflict) would have ended."

### Syria war

Putin has also supported fellow autocrats in different countries, including Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko and Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro.

The Kremlin has backed the autocratic Syrian President Bashar al Assad since the Syrian Civil War began in 2011. Russia deployed troops in Syria in 2015. Assad has used chemical weapons during the war, and Russia has tried to white-wash his actions.

Amnesty International said that "Russia is guilty of some of the most egregious war crimes" in Syria it had seen in decades.

Specifically, Russia used clus-

ter bombs and white phosphorus and carried out air strikes on densely populated civilian areas. Russian warplanes also deliberately destroyed hospitals and targeted rescue workers.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights attributed 83,500 civilian deaths to the Assad regime and its allies, including Russia.

### Western response

The West has responded to Russia's interference in the U.S. elections, its war against Ukraine and the jailing of his main political foe Alexei Navalny in 2021 by imposing sanctions.

However, the current sanctions are unlikely to lead to the collapse of Russia's economy or Putin's regime, Russian political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin told the Kyiv Post.

Cutting Russia off from the SWIFT payment system would cripple the Russian economy, although the West is unlikely to do so, he argued.

"If they wanted to really hurt Putin, they would also freeze Putin's personal accounts abroad," he added.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has opposed antagonizing the Kremlin due to strong economic ties.

She has also defended the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline link between Russia and Germany via the Baltic Sea. The \$11.6 billion pipeline bypasses Russia's main natural gas transit route through Ukraine.

Biden was expected to toughen sanctions to stop completion of the pipeline, but so far has not expanded them. His predecessor, Donald J. Trump, even praised Putin and had a bromance with the Kremlin leader.

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron has called for a reset with Russia.

"Putin skillfully uses contradictions between Western countries and has found their weak spots," Fesenko said. ☺

AFP

# Sergii Leshchenko: Ukraine must end Firtash's control over gas distribution

page 2 →

Running the broad distribution system, Firtash is paid by each house or apartment connected to it. But there is also a shadow part to this "business." In a nutshell, the gas distributors used to write off cheap gas for the population as losses in the gas system. In reality, this gas was used for production at Firtash's enterprises. The chemical enterprises used the cheap gas, intended for the population, to produce expensive nitrogen fertilizers.

The model operated safely until a unified gas price was introduced after Yanukovich fled to Russia in 2014. Now the schemers have less profit, and stealing gas as before will not work.

The scale of the theft can be assessed from the example of a local gas distributor — Kirovogradgas. When state-owned oil and gas company Naftogaz took control of this distributor, it discovered a model that was scaled to the entire country. Entire streets of non-existing houses were recorded among gas consumers. In addition, there were records of gas being lost in accidents that in reality did not happen.

Where was the stolen gas going? To the alcohol distilleries, which worked normally during that day but then had their "black market" shift at night, producing black-market alcohol, which they then sold.

For a long time, although the state controlled 51% of Kirovogradgas, the company was in reality controlled by Firtash's people through a 28% share, held by a Hong Kong citizen who also owned shares in the Clearing House Bank of the Lyovochkin family.

## How he did it

The problems of regional gas distributors stem from the voucher privatization of the 1990s when employees became minority owners of the

gas distributors and then oligarchic groups bought a small amount of shares from them.

One of the people who participated in the privatization was Oleg Bakhmatyuk, an agricultural oligarch who is now hiding from Ukraine's National Anti-Corruption Bureau in Austria. He had an astounding career in Naftogaz after the Orange Revolution. In 2005, Bakhmatyuk became the head of the department of expert appraisal of investments, and in 2006 he was appointed the deputy head of Naftogaz. Also in 2006, he bought controlling stakes in local Ivano-Frankivskgaz, Lvivgaz, Zakarpatgaz, Chernivtsygaz and Volyngaz, and then sold them to Firtash.

Firtash's triumph came in 2012. It was a year and a half after Yanukovich was elected president. By that time, he consolidated all the power, and was paying off the debts to the clans that had supported him. Akhmetov took over the coal energy sector and regional power suppliers, which he bought up without proper competition.

Firtash, who was in charge of the gas sphere, secured regional gas stations for himself. The competitors were screened out. Only companies that met the terms of the tender, and were aligned with Firtash's interests, could take part in the privatization.

Firtash's decisive breakthrough came in the middle of 2012, when Gaztek, a company linked to the oligarch, bought shares of 13 gas supplying companies from the state within two months. For all of it, the company paid Hr 326 million or less than \$50 million. As it turned out later, Gaztek employed only two people, although the company owned assets worth Hr 1 billion.

The privatization of regional gas distributors was preceded by a generous gift from the state. It wrote off all the debts of these companies — \$3 billion at that rate — before



A woman passes the headquarters of regional gas distribution company Kirovogradgas in the city of Kropyvnytskyi on Feb. 20, 2019. Many Ukrainian pensioners struggle to pay for gas and heating. Meanwhile, between 2009 and 2017 Kirovogradgas's management allegedly stole \$2.8 million worth of gas subsidised for domestic consumers. A similar scheme allegedly worked at many gas distribution companies owned by oligarch Dmytro Firtash, writes Kyiv Post columnist Sergii Leshchenko.

private investors were brought into the company.

As of 2016 and until now, Dmytro Firtash and his partners control over 70 percent of the gas supply to the population.

Initially, Firtash's idea was to bring the regional gas distributors under the umbrella of his joint company with Naftogaz and Gazprom — a Ukrainian subsidiary of RosUkrEnergo, UkrGazEnergo. But Firtash turned out to be cunning — instead of doing that, he took the domestic consumers for himself. This gave him both leverage over authorities and a source of unaccounted gas for his chemical plants.

## Firtash today

While he was making good money at home, Firtash got into trouble overseas. He became the second oligarch in the history of Ukraine, after Pavlo Lazarenko, to be indicted by the U.S. authorities. He was arrested in Vienna in March 2014.

He spent nine days in custody and was released on the bail of 125 million euros, the highest in Austrian history. The bail was paid by the Russian billionaire Vasily Anisimov, who happened to be a friend of Arkady Rotenberg. Rotenberg is not just a member of Putin's inner circle and his judo sparring partner, but also had lent Firtash huge sums of money to buy chemical plants in Ukraine, and was his senior partner in this business.

Firtash hired an army of lawyers. Firtash's defense team was led by former Austrian Justice Minister Dieter Boehmdorfer. The public rehabilitation plan for Firtash was written by Paul Manafort, who a few years earlier had consulted him on the purchase of real estate in America, an \$885 million plot of land in New York City on which the Drake Hotel was located.

In 2019, Firtash decided to do Rudy Giuliani a favor by launching a dirt-digging campaign for Donald

Trump's rival Joe Biden. The oligarch secured an affidavit in Austria from former Attorney General Viktor Shokin, who said exactly what Giuliani wanted to hear: that Shokin was allegedly fired from his post under pressure from Biden, who wanted to block the investigation of his son Hunter in Ukraine.

Giuliani subsequently used this testimony heavily in a propaganda campaign for the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Later, Giuliani's friends Joe DiGenova and Victoria Toensing started working with Firtash as advocates.

At the end of the day, it did not bring Firtash any success. Biden got elected. And the U.S. authorities continue to push for Firtash's extradition.

And now is a good moment for Ukraine to take down another robber baron and add Firtash's name to the list that now includes Medvedchuk and Kolomoisky.

The state still has a trump card up its sleeve: It can deploy the National Security and Defense Council to give the control of all regional gas distributors back to Naftogaz, and arrange a concession tender for them. This will deprive Firtash of his monopoly and leave him with nothing but the offices of the regional gas companies.

This would be tantamount to declaring war on one of the big clans, which is represented by lawmakers and the media weapon, the Inter TV channel. As the enemy of the state has been weakened and there is a great demand for justice in the society, it means that now is the best moment for such a special operation.

*Sergii Leshchenko, the former deputy chief editor of Ukrainska Pravda, was a member of Ukraine's parliament, serving from October 2014 as part of ex-President Petro Poroshenko's Bloc. He lost his re-election bid in the July 21, 2019, parliamentary race. He started writing columns for the Kyiv Post in October 2019.*

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# Lifestyle

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## Ukrainian duo Bloom Twins want to do it all

Courtesy of Bloom Twins



Ukrainian music duo Bloom Twins, Anna and Sofia Kuprienko, don iconic metallic corsets by Irish designer Graham Cruz during a photoshoot for their recent single "Day Dream" with Italian DJ Benny Benassi. Known for dark pop music and fashion looks, London-based Bloom Twins are the next international rising pop stars from Ukraine.

By Elina Kent  
[kent@kyivpost.com](mailto:kent@kyivpost.com)

It all started with a DM.

"I would love to share some songs with you," Sonia Kuprienko, one half of the Ukrainian duo, Bloom Twins, wrote to Grammy-winning Italian DJ, Benny Benassi.

The London-based dark pop group wasn't expecting a response.

But soon a notification popped up. Benny Benassi checked the playlist of their songs, and one of them caught his eye.

"I love it. I think it could be really great. Could you send the vocals?" Benassi wrote back.

Several months later, the collaboration of Bloom Twins and top international DJ resulted in the release of an electric pop single "Day Dream" on March 26.

The song with Benny Benassi is the most recent but not the only star collaboration of Bloom Twins. They have previously toured with such bands as Duran Duran and Eels.

As the Ukrainian twins, Anna and Sofia Kuprienko, both 25, are building their music career in London,

they are dreaming big of future releases featuring other big names.

### Born into music

The sisters were born into the world of music.

Their parents are also musicians, who met while forming a band, with their father playing the drums and guitar and their mother singing. The parents' musical genes passed on to their twin daughters, as the two started singing before they could even speak, growing up in a small apartment in Brovary, a city of 109,000 in Kyiv Oblast.

"We had lots of instruments, and it was way too loud for the neighbors," Sonia told the Kyiv Post.

"Music was always around us," Anna adds.

Although music surrounded the two during their childhood, it isn't something they expected to continue on as a career. In fact, Anna was planning on becoming a mathematician. The two also modeled for a bit, and through a casting process, they met their soon-to-be managers.

The managers recommended moving to a city with more opportu-

nities, like Tokyo or London. The two ended up in the U.K. capital shortly after in 2013 and would go for three months at a time, to test the waters.

Only 17 at the time, the move from the small city of Brovary, just 30 minutes outside of Kyiv, to London was a huge change. They didn't know English when they arrived and worked at Starbucks to practice the language.

"We had a rule that we would never speak Russian (their native language)," Sonia says. "That meant using the three words you know, or five, and rebuilding."

Through hard work and plenty of vocabulary sticky notes, their efforts paid off. At this point in time, anyone could assume that Bloom Twins are native English speakers.

Although they were able to successfully assimilate in London, they didn't forget about Ukraine.

Moving just before the events of the 2013–2014 EuroMaidan Revolution, which ousted pro-Kremlin ex-President Viktor Yanukovich, Bloom Twins used their music to bring attention to the protests. The music video for their song "Get Up

Stand Up" used footage of the mass uprising.

But when they were starting out, Ukraine didn't have the daily open mic opportunities London provided them, where the twins would go to various pubs and clubs to perform, sometimes multiple times a day. So they continued to pursue their dream in the U.K. capital.

Aside from their 2018 mini-album "Winter's Tale," the band has released 11 singles since foundation. Their most-streamed song "Blue" has exceeded 1 million streams on Spotify. And their most-watched music video for "Love Me Right Now" has over 1.3 million views on YouTube.

### Complete opposites

The twins' taste and style both contradict and complement each other at the same time.

"Anna and I are very different, although we are also very much alike, but complete opposites," Sonia says.

That contradiction naturally blended into the dark pop they produce.

## City Life

With Yana Mokhonchuk  
[mokhonchuk@kyivpost.com](mailto:mokhonchuk@kyivpost.com)

### Top delivery options for fresh produce from locals in Kyiv lockdown

As Kyiv citizens returned to the lockdown life on March 20, cooking at home is gaining popularity again, just like a year ago, when the first pandemic measures were introduced across Ukraine.

The lockdown will stay in force at least through April 16.

With food markets shut, finding perfectly fresh produce might not be easy for the real gourmets. And with the number of new COVID-19 cases on the rise, some might feel hesitant to make multiple trips to grocery stores.

The Kyiv Post has picked out some of the best small delivery services offering fresh vegetables, fruit, cheese, seafood and some ready-to-cook meals.

#### Fruit and veggies

Kyiv-based fruit and vegetable delivery service **Ovo** is a big hit among Kyivans, taking just a day to deliver placed orders. The company offers a wide choice of vegetables from zucchini and broccoli to the rarer finds of sweet potatoes and bok choy. Other items on the menu include all sorts of greenery, mushrooms, fruit, nuts, dried fruit and smoothies. Ovo delivers all around Kyiv, charging Hr 200 (\$7) for orders of less than Hr 500 (\$18). Orders over Hr 500, are delivered within Kyiv for free. Ovo provides free delivery to the suburbs for orders of Hr 2,000 (\$72).

**Fruit Time** has a full-fledged supermarket choice on its web store, with a variety of grocery products. There are vegetables, mushrooms, cereals, eggs, fruit, nuts, honey, oil and even spices. The company offers some exotic fruit that is difficult to find in Kyiv, such as dragon fruit, four kinds of mango and passion fruit. The store provides all the details about the origins of the imported products and their storage conditions. The cost of the delivery depends on the distance. Fruit Time has free delivery for orders starting at Hr 449 (\$17) within Kyiv. Delivery to the suburbs is available for orders of at least Hr 1,500 (\$54).

The online food market **FreshMart** is another perfect choice to order all products needed to prepare a whole meal. Aside from an array of vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds, dried fruit and cereals, the company offers sweets like jams,

# Bloom Twins turn pandemic into most productive year in their music career

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Though having a pop structure, the genre has an overall dark vibe.

"Dark pop is when you mix two things that normally don't work together, so that's exactly what we did," Anna says.

Although the twins may disagree on music production decisions, when they find something they both like, the end result is incredible.

"It's so difficult but it's great, that's the beauty," Anna says. "When you work hard on it, then it pays off."

Even the way the twins hear and create music is different. Anna produces the songs, while Sonia writes the lyrics.

"Anna does not listen to lyrics when she hears a song," Sonia says. "The only things I hear are the melody and the lyrics."

Combining work styles, genres and taste is what brings the unusual mixture Bloom Twins are known for.

And that's how their most recent track, "Day Dream," was created. Originally an alternative song, when mixed with the Benny Benassi sound, which had more of a pop feel, delivered the electric dance song that it is today.

Bloom Twins are a triple threat. They not only make music, but act, and are involved in fashion, where their styles also differ.

While Anna prefers black but



Bloom Twins, Ukrainian dark pop duo of Anna and Sonia Kuprienko, perform in their 2019 "Love Me Right Now" music video which has reached over 1.3 million views on YouTube. The London-based twins use produce dark pop sound by mixing genres and sounds that normally don't work together.

makes sure it still stands out and is a little over the top, Sonia experiments with colors and patterns. The twins model for brands such as Benetton, Burberry, Giuseppe Zanotti, and more, serving stylized looks daily.

## DM galore

Although it seemed like the world had come to a standstill when the coronavirus pandemic first showed

up on the scene in early 2020, the past year has been the most productive in Bloom Twins' career.

"The first thing we did was Sonia literally DM-ed everyone she could think of," Anna says.

"During quarantine, we wrote more songs than we ever did," Sonia adds.

Because of the pandemic, their other projects such as their various

fashion campaigns were put on hold, so their focus and energy were only on the music.

"You wake up and you go to bed with music," Sonia says. "At times, we would write three or four songs per day."

Messaging artists, designers and creatives, the Bloom Twins' pandemic year made them engage in all sorts of new projects and opportunities.

The designers involved in their recent track "Day Dream" were also connected through their DM campaign. One of them was Irish Graham Cruz, known for his metallic fitted corsets worn by taste-makers Jennifer Lopez, Janelle Monae, Khloe Kardashian and Paris Hilton. Now Bloom Twins joined the list appearing in their latest video wearing metallic pieces.

The passion for creating continues to drive them forward. They're now preparing a new release for May, made with someone who is still kept in secret.

"It's a collaboration with a very cool guy, but this is as much as we can say," Anna says.

There are plenty of other artists that Bloom Twins hope to collaborate with in the future, such as Kaytranada and Ben Böhmer. Another one is Lenny Kravitz, a U.S. singer with Ukrainian roots who invited the two to go on tour with him before the pandemic but the plans have been put on hold.

"That would be my dream-come-true," Sonia says.

The twins' eyes light up as they talk about all future collaborations and work that can be done with more producers and artists.

"They all have their own value, and they are all colors that they bring to the table," Sonia says. "I want to do it all." 🌈



## Embassy of India, Kyiv

### SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS OFFERED BY GOVERNMENT OF INDIA FOR PROFESSIONALS AND STUDENTS



#### Fully funded training programs for Government Officials and other Professionals.

Government of India had launched Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme for bilateral cooperation and technical assistance. The ITEC Programme is fully funded by the Government of India and provides training programs for Government Officials and Working Professionals from India's ITEC partner countries, including Ukraine.

Under this program, professionals from partner countries are offered unique training courses, both civilian and defense, in various centers of excellence and institutions in India, which empower them with not just professional skills, but prepare them for an increasingly globalized world. More than 300 short-term, medium-term and long-term courses are offered each year. The training is offered in various subjects such as accounts, audit, banking and finance, management, computers, advanced computing, information technology, telecommunications, labor issues, entrepreneurship development, small medium enterprises (SME) business development, rural development, English-language proficiency, mass communication, educational planning and management, tool design, pharmaceuticals, education and research, textile research, environment and renewable energy etc.

Many Ukrainian government officials/professionals have also been beneficiary of ITEC training courses in previous years. Preference of Ukrainian officials in past have been in IT, Audit, Accounting, Banking, Management, Communication and Language courses.

**Salient features:** ITEC program is fully funded by the Government of India and includes the following expenses:

- Return air fares
- Course fee & book allowance
- Visa
- Accommodation
- Living Allowance

Study tours and excursions to select historic/touristic places in India.

**How to Apply:** For the Year 2021-22, ITEC courses can be applied for on ITEC website: <https://www.itecgoi.in/e-itec.php>. After applying, applicants have to contact ITEC Officer in the Embassy of India at [cul.kyiv@mea.gov.in](mailto:cul.kyiv@mea.gov.in) for completion of other formalities such as scrutinizing of applications, eligibility for the applicants/courses etc. Final decision for selection of the applicant is taken by the Ministry of External Affairs of India in consultation with concerned Institutes. Mostly, Government officials are considered for the ITEC courses. However, applications of private professionals from renowned multi-national organizations may also be considered.

**Specific eligibility criteria for each course, following are the general pre-requisites for ITEC training in India:**

- Candidate should possess working knowledge of English for attending English language courses, and for other courses, candidate should possess a good knowledge of English.
- Applications of Government officials should be recommended by Head of the Department.
- Applications of Private professionals should be suitably recommended by either Head of their functions in case of recognized Multinational Company, or by Chamber of Commerce.



Indian Council for Cultural Relations

#### Educational scholarship programs for Ukrainian Students

India is one of the largest and fastest growing global economies. At the same time, it is a land of thousands of years of history, culture and human spirit. India has produced some of the greatest scientific and educational advances, from the discovery of zero, to the modern number system, path-breaking advances in engineering, astronomy, architecture, culture, art, literature, and is also the home of Yoga and Ayurveda. Studying in India is not just an attractive academic opportunity, but also a possibility for greater self-transformation.

Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), established with a mandate of administering scholarship programs of Government of India annually, awards about 3940 scholarships under 26 different schemes to foreign students from about 140 countries including students from Ukraine. The courses offered for studies are for under-graduation, post-graduation and M. Phil /PhD levels in all subjects e.g. Languages, International Relations, History, Science and Engineering etc. in almost all prominent Government Universities/Institutes such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, Banaras Hindu University, Jadavpur University, Bangalore University etc.

Over the years, many Ukrainian students have been beneficiaries of these scholarships for under-graduate/post-graduate studies in various Indian Universities. For the academic year 2021-22, ICCR has allotted Five (05) Scholarship Slots for meritorious students from Ukraine to pursue various courses in India. A wide spectrum of courses are available.

#### Salient features of the Scholarship:

- Course fee would be borne by ICCR
- Embassy will provide gratis visa for travel and stay in India
- Stipend would be paid to students by ICCR
- Airfare to be borne by students themselves
- Medical insurance to be procured by the students themselves

#### Requirements:

- Students of all major faculties except Medicine may apply. For engineering courses, Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics are compulsory in 11 and 12 grades of schooling.
- Candidate must possess good knowledge of English.
- Candidate must be between the age of 18 and 30 years.

#### How to Apply: (Deadline for 2021-22: April 30, 2021)

Candidates can apply at ICCR's A2A portal: <http://a2ascholarships.iccr.gov.in/>. The portal contains all relevant information regarding ICCR sponsored scholarship schemes, including courses offered by different Universities, guidelines for application, etc. Interested students may visit A2A Portal and also specific partner University/Institute's website to know the eligibility criteria before finalizing of preferences of University/Institute. After filling the application, the candidates may contact the Embassy at [cul.kyiv@mea.gov.in](mailto:cul.kyiv@mea.gov.in)

Advertisement

# Home cooking is trendy again, here's where to buy ingredients

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nut pastes and craft chocolate. Juices and smoothies are on the drink menu. There are also a bunch of combo boxes, like the one for cooking guacamole. The orders can be either delivered by FreshMart's own courier service or through the Nova Poshta private parcel delivery firm. FreshMart charges Hr 38 (\$1.4) for orders starting at Hr 500 (\$18) within Kyiv. To get a package delivered to the suburbs, customers need to buy for at least Hr 1,500 (\$54).

Ovo. [www.ovo.ua](http://www.ovo.ua).

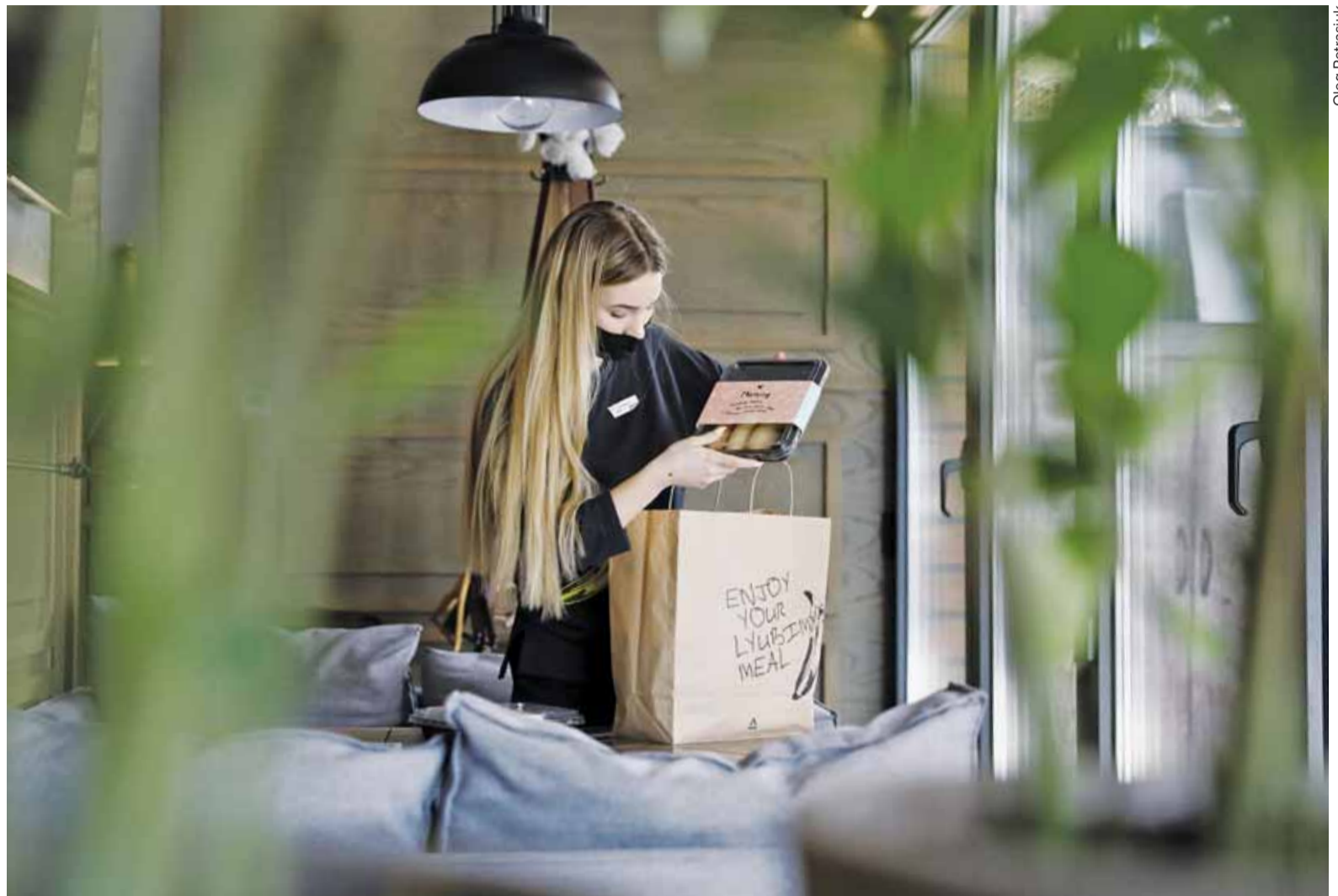
Fruit Time. [www.fruit-time.ua](http://www.fruit-time.ua).

FreshMart. [www.freshmart.com.ua](http://www.freshmart.com.ua).

## Seafood

During the lockdown, the chain of fish restaurants **Chernomorka** launched a "virtual restaurant," where online customers can chat with servers, pick a dish from the menu and order a delivery. In addition, Chernomorka offers scaled, cleaned and marinated seafood. The website posts fresh options every day such as a variety of salmon whole round or steak. It is also possible to order the fresh seafood cooked, pan fried or grilled, with the options of creamy or tomato sauce. Chernomorka charges Hr 70 (\$3) for delivery within Kyiv and Hr 150 (\$5) outside of Kyiv.

Another option for seafood delivery is the online fish market **Seadora**. It offers fresh produce caught abroad and transported to Ukraine without freezing. Caviar straight from Alaska, herring from the Netherlands, salmon from Scotland and fish caught in both the Ukrainian rivers and the Black Sea are in the online store. The delivery by Seadora's courier service is Hr 50 (\$2) and Hr 100 (\$4) by the Meest Express delivery service within Kyiv. Delivery outside of Kyiv costs Hr 100 (\$4).



Oleg Petrasjuk

An employee of delivery service Mammy prepares an order at the Lyubimy Dyadya (Favorite Uncle) restaurant on April 8, 2020. Mammy was launched by First Line Group, which runs a number of hit restaurants in Kyiv, to deliver ready-to-cook food of "restaurant quality" such as pasta, dumplings, crêpes and more.

Chernomorka. [www.chernomorka.online](http://www.chernomorka.online).

Seadora. [www.seadora.com.ua](http://www.seadora.com.ua).

## Craft cheese & vegan

Vegetable food production **Zelena Korova** (Green Cow) sells products suitable for those following a vegan diet. Its choices feature tofu, soy pate,

falafel, chickpea hummus, sesame or bean paste and vegan sausages. The company accepts orders for more than Hr 300 (\$11) and delivers them through Nova Poshta.

**Syroman** is the place to go for fans of all sorts of cheese. It has a wide range of cheeses including cow, goat and sheep, aged and young, and with

blue and white mold. The company also offers meat delicacies, olives, sun-dried tomatoes and sauces to be served with a cheese plate. Syroman's courier delivery in Kyiv is available for Hr 70 (\$3) for the orders that start at Hr 450 (\$15). Another option is self-pickup at Syroman's store.

Zelena Korova. [www.zelenakorova.com.ua](http://www.zelenakorova.com.ua).

Syroman. Order at [www.syroman.com.ua](http://www.syroman.com.ua). Pick up at 10A Dmytra Lutsenka St. Mon – Sun. 12 p.m. – 8 p.m.

## Ready-to-cook

The star restaurant company, First Line Group, which runs a number of hit restaurants in Kyiv such as Italienskaya Redaktsia (Italian Edition) and Eastman, has launched its own delivery service called **Mammy**. The service offers ready-to-cook food of "restaurant quality" that customers can make according to recipes Mammy publishes online. The menu includes a variety of dumplings, pasta, meatballs, crêpes with savory or sweet filling and syrnyky, Ukrainian cottage cheese pancakes. The ready-to-cook dishes

can be ordered from the group's restaurant Lyubimy Dyadya (Favorite Uncle) through the Raketa delivery service or by phone.

**Gudfood At Home** delivers pre-homemade dishes that take 10 minutes to cook. The choice includes dumplings, ravioli, lasagna, meatballs, syrnyky, cinnamon rolls, croissants, vegetable bowls, sourdough bread and all kinds of sauces. Delivery is available from Sunday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The company provides free delivery for orders of more than Hr 300 (\$11) within Kyiv. Suburban delivery costs Hr 100 (\$4) for orders starting at Hr 500 (\$18). Self-pickup is also available at the Gudfood shop.

Mammy. Check the menu at [www.readymag.com/firstlinegroup/mammy](http://www.readymag.com/firstlinegroup/mammy). Order through the Raketa app or by phone +38067 506 3198. Pick up at Lyubimy Dyadya (20 Pankivska St.) 10 a.m. – 9:30 p.m.

Gudfood At Home. Order at [www.foods.w3b.services/menu/gudfood](http://www.foods.w3b.services/menu/gudfood). Pick up at Gudfood (14 Kostiantyna Dankevycha St.) Mon – Sun. 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. 📞

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HR manager at ProCredit Bank



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at Robota.ua

**APRIL 14, 11:00 A.M. – 11:45 A.M.**  
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**NINA KARMAZINA**  
Head of HR department at Volia

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