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# Kyiv Post

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# Skyjacking

## The other dictator in Ukraine's neighborhood breaks with the West



Lukashenko's revenge: 436 political prisoners, including 35 journalists jailed

By Oleg Sukhov  
[sukhov@kyivpost.com](mailto:sukhov@kyivpost.com)

Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, are just the latest political prisoners to lose their freedom in dictator Alexander Lukashenko's jails.

But they are far from the only ones.

In his continuing crackdown on leaders of national demonstra-

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### Europe has had enough of Lukashenko's ludicrous lies

By Oleksiy Sorokin  
[sorokin@kyivpost.com](mailto:sorokin@kyivpost.com)

Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko is known for spreading outrageous lies to cover for his gross violations of human rights in a country he's held in his grip since 1994.

But when he ordered the hijacking of a passenger plane to seize a journalist that criticized him, Europe

→ page 12

A man holds a picture of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko with the caption "Go away!" during a protest in Minsk on Aug. 14, 2020, five days after the dictator claimed victory in an election that Belarusians believe was rigged. Belarusians have staged mass rallies since then, demanding an end to Lukashenko's 27-year rule in the ex-Soviet republic of 9 million people. Lukashenko, with Russia's support, has engineered a crackdown on protesters and media. Demonstrators and journalists have been beaten and jailed. On May 23, 2021, Lukashenko dispatched a fighter jet to force a plane carrying journalist and protest leader Roman Protasevich to Minsk, where he was arrested.



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Засновник ТОВ "БІЗНЕСГРУПП"

Головний редактор  
Брайан Боннер

Відповідальний за випуск  
Брайан Боннер

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

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# Here is how Ukraine can take on this oligarch's energy monopoly



Lesia Vasylenko

If you look at the map of the coal generated electricity in Ukraine, the biggest share is attributed to companies owned by Rinat Akhmetov's DTEK.

Basically what we are dealing with is a monopoly in the energy market, which hurts the country's energy security, damages the environment, causes uncalled for health expenses and leads to breaches of international obligations.

Who is to blame?

- The National Anti-Monopoly Committee, which has failed to see the monopolization of the energy market, which has been ongoing for a decade at least!
- The National Asset Management Fund, which has failed to see DTEK's non-compliance with the terms and conditions of the privatization agreements of the power plants.
- The failure of the courts and whole government establishment to push back against oligarchs and coal barons who now hold Ukrainians and Europeans hostage to toxic emissions from outdated coal plants.
- The monopoly must be broken down.
- A coal phase-out program must be in place, with a robust strategy and infrastructure for its imple-



A photo of the Darnytska combined cycle plant in Kyiv, taken on August 12, 2015. The plant is owned by Ukraine's richest oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov, whose power plants are among the biggest polluters in Europe.

mentation. This measure is the most realistic.

- DTEK must be brought to compliance with the sale purchase agreement conditions, whereby they were to install filters on all their power plants by 2015. However, this is unrealistic mainly because DTEK understands that it is cheaper for it to give the

used-up Soviet-era "assets" back to the state rather than comply. And once back in government hands, the coal power plants become the problem of the government.

There are national-level solutions: A strong determination to get rid of oligarchic influence, political will, transparent and strong courts.

There are also international-level

solutions: Turn to international partners for help. Ukraine needs sanctions against oligarchic groups who pollute Europe and Ukraine and investigations into the flows of dirty coal money into Europe.

Lesia Vasylenko is a member of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, with the 20-member Voice faction. ☞

# Akhmetov's power plants are the dirtiest in Europe

By Anastasiia Lapatina  
lapatina@kyivpost.com

The Ukrainian town of Burshtyn is one of the few places in the world where the snow falls black.

Located in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, 560 kilometers southwest of Kyiv, this town of 15,000 sits near Europe's dirtiest coal-fired thermal power plant. Soot and other chemicals from poorly filtered chimneys settle on the adjacent area, making the snow dirty, the rains acidic, the locals sick, and air quality catastrophically dangerous.

The plant's owner — Ukraine's richest man Rinat Akhmetov — uses his formidable lobbying power to avoid repercussions and strike down any attempts at environmental regulation. Bills to rein in emissions fail time and again in parliament, where Akhmetov reportedly controls up to 100 lawmakers, an allegation that he denies.

Ukraine consistently ranks among the top three air polluters in Europe.



A Feb. 24, 2021 shows the Burshtynska coal-fired thermal power plant, located in Burshtyn in western Ukraine. It is the biggest emitter of 10-micrometer particles in all of Europe, and one of the dirtiest power plants in the region. It is also owned by powerful Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov.

# Who can stop Akhmetov's black rain in power plants?

page 2 →

Every fifth death in Ukraine can be traced to poor air quality, which kills 54,000 people in Ukraine per year.

"Being Europe's biggest polluter is a questionable achievement" Kostiantyn Krynytskyi, an energy expert with environmental nonprofit Ecodia, told the Kyiv Post. "The use of coal poses enormous risks to the health and lives of our citizens."

When coal is burned to generate electricity, three main pollutants — PM10, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxide — are released into the air. These can travel thousands of kilometers, making air pollution a global problem.

PM10 stands for particulate matter 10 micrometers in diameter, such as coal ash. It can get into the bloodstream and cause strokes, as well as heart and lung diseases.

"Coal ash is very poisonous to humans because it contains toxic heavy metals. When it settles on the ground, the soil becomes contaminated and the quality of agricultural produce deteriorates," Oleg Savytskyi, a board member with Ecodia, told the Kyiv Post.

Sulfur dioxide can cause a deadly accumulation of fluids in the lungs and worsen asthma attacks and existing heart diseases.

Nitrogen oxide also attacks the respiratory system and can lead to asthma and lung cancer.

"Coal energy in Ukraine is the largest source of air pollution with these toxic substances," Savytskyi said.

Indeed, Ukraine produces over 70% of all emissions of PM10, 27% of sulfur dioxide, and 16% of nitrogen oxides in all of Europe, including Turkey, according to a new study by climate and energy think tank Ember.

Europe's top 10 emitters of PM10 include eight Ukrainian power plants. The top five sources of PM10 are all in Ukraine.

Half of the plants on Ember's top 10 list belong to Akhmetov's energy conglomerate, DTEK.

Andriy Gerus, a member of parliament with President Volodymyr Zelensky's 244-member Servant of the People party, said the study reveals a lot about how Akhmetov gets away with pollution.

"The findings show how Akhmetov political lobby works: if Akhmetov benefits from European rules, Ukraine implements it (European prices for electricity, feed-in tariffs for renewables etc.)," Gerus told the Kyiv Post. "If European rules mean that Akhmetov will pay more, Ukraine does not introduce such rules (railway tariffs, taxes for CO2 emission, taxes for coal and iron ore extraction etc.). The solution is quite simple — to increase taxes for emissions. Ukrainian taxes for CO2 amount to 0.5 euro per ton vs. 20–40 euro per ton in the European Union."

## The owner

DTEK has denied violating environmental rules, stating that it operates "exclusively in compliance with environmental legislation



A drone picture shows an aerial view of the No. 1 Kyivenerho heat supply station in Kyiv on Dec. 7, 2020.

Volodymyr Petrov

and within the emission permit."

The company further claimed that it reduced its harmful emissions by 58% in the past eight years by modernizing its coal power plants, including the Burshtyn facility, and building more renewable energy sources.

DTEK controls two-thirds of coal power in the country and has deep ties with the Ukrainian government.

For example, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine found evidence that DTEK colluded with Ukraine's energy regulator to create the Rotterdam+ scheme, an electricity pricing policy that allegedly bilked Hr 39 billion (about \$1.4 billion) from Ukrainian consumers. The company has fiercely denied wrongdoing.

Akhmetov is widely reported to have ties to Ukrainian politicians. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal held senior positions at DTEK prior to his current role. Shmyhal was the general director of the Burshtyn plant, Europe's top air polluter.

The oligarch controls at least 100 lawmakers in parliament, according to investigative project Nashi Groshi.

Akhmetov has denied controlling anybody. However, all 25 members of the Batkivshchyna faction, over 30 lawmakers from Servant of the People and many others consistently vote for Akhmetov's interests, journalists say.

## Unwanted bills

Since 2020, parliament has twice failed to adopt bill No. 4167 "On prevention, reduction and control of industrial pollution."

The bill sets guidelines for the gradual reduction of harmful emissions from industrial enterprises. One key aspect of the bill is the

requirement to gradually modernize coal-burning power plants to lower dangerous emissions.

"We are not forcing anyone to close their coal enterprises, we just ask the business to transition to better, European technologies which will lower emissions," Oleg Bondarenko, the head of the parliament's Committee on Environmental Policy and Nature Management, told the Kyiv Post.

But evidently, many lawmakers think that's too much to ask. The bill has recently failed to get enough votes and was sent back for revision for the second time on May 21. Batkivshchyna lawmakers, who traditionally push Akhmetov's agenda, either voted against the bill or abstained, as did 50 "Servants."

Svitlana Sushko, the director of the Reform Support Team at the Environment Ministry, sees this as evidence that coal industry insiders are fighting against reforms.

"The failure to vote on Bill No. 4167 in the parliament for the second time, according to some politicians, shows the great influence of dishonest business and opposition to modernization," she told the Kyiv Post.

Emission standards are hard to enforce when power plants often block government inspectors from entering the premises. DTEK's plant in Burshtyn hasn't been inspected in years.

"Inspectors just can't access these enterprises — either because the plant's management finds loopholes in the law to bar them entry, or something else," Sushko told the Kyiv Post.

As a result, the plant's management pays "ridiculously low" fines and avoids any real responsibility.

Bill No. 3091 "About state eco-

logical control" can increase fines for obstructing the work of inspectors. But it's also being blocked by lobbyists.

"The biggest problem is that the oligarchs are now actively using their influence groups in parliament to delay the adoption of Bills 4167 and 3091," Savytskyi says.

## No money

In 2017, the government adopted a "National plan to reduce emissions from large combustion plants." It aims to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by 72% by 2033 and sulfur and dust emissions by 95% by 2028.

This plan, along with bill No. 4167, is Ukraine's response to directive 2010/75/EU of the European Union that obliges Ukraine to cut industrial emissions and modernize combustion plants.

Yet the plan is failing, and Ukraine won't make the deadlines, experts say.

Business owners blame unreasonably high expectations, COVID-19, and lack of government financing.

"Lack of sources of funding for enterprises in the industry has led to the inability of plant operators

to make capital-intensive long-term investments in environmental measures required by the national plan," claimed representatives of the European Business Association Committee for Industrial Ecology and Sustainable Development.

However, Ukraine has spent 751 million euros to support the coal industry in 2018 and 2019, Krynytskyi told the Kyiv Post. This is the largest amount of direct coal subsidies of all member states of the Energy Community, which Ukraine is part of.

Bondarenko and Sushko think that coal power plant owners oppose bill 4167 because modernization is expensive.

"Their argument is that the government has to invest, but this leads nowhere because that means nothing will get done until the state finds the money," Sushko says.

"They bought these enterprises basically for free during the privatization period," Bondarenko said. "Now, as their productive capacities are going down, owners are just trying to squeeze everything they can from these properties and then close them down for good." ❖

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EDITORIALS

# Strategic instability

It looks like “strategic stability” has replaced “reset” in U.S. President Joe Biden’s arsenal of buzzwords when it comes to the American relationship with Russia. It is doomed to failure, just as the “reset” of U.S. President Barack Obama’s administration went up in flames.

Why? Vladimir Putin wants instability, not stability. He’s at war against the West and never hides his contempt for democracy.

After National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s May 24 meeting with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev came this readout: “A wide range of issues of mutual interest were discussed with a high priority given to the topic of strategic stability. The sides expressed confidence that mutually acceptable solutions could be found in a number of areas. The sides agreed that a normalization of U.S.-Russian relations would be in the interest of both countries and contribute to global predictability and stability.”

That was preceded by the May 19 statement after the meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in which Blinken “noted that the United States sought a more stable and predictable relationship with Moscow.”

All of that came before Biden’s explanation on May 26 that adopting sanctions to kill Nord Stream 2 would be “counterproductive” to US-German relations. And yet another European appeasement leader, besides Germany’s Angela Merkel, is France’s Emmanuel Macron.

He questioned the Western approach of sanctioning Russia.

“I think that we are at a moment of truth in our relationship with Russia, which should lead us to rethink the ... tension that we decide to put in place,” he said. When pressed, he came up a straw man argument. “What would you like us to do? Do we start an armed conflict? Do we completely cut off relations? Do we go further with sanctions – but where to?”

Ridiculous. The West adopted weak and poorly enforced sanctions. No wonder they failed. Now milquetoast Macron wants to throw in the towel on those feeble steps.

So where does this leave Ukraine? On its own – and certainly not expecting much from the Biden-Putin summit on June 16 in Geneva.

More than seven years after Russia seized 7 percent of Ukrainian territory, the West continues to wimp out, exacerbating global insecurity as dictators realize they face no meaningful consequences for war crimes, murder, interference with Western elections and human rights abuses.

In Nord Stream 2, the pipeline delivering natural gas directly between Russia and Germany, Berlin is putting its commercial interests with Russia on top. The U.S. compounds the error by going along so as not to irritate Germany. Is it any wonder sanctions aren’t working when an \$11 billion, 1,220-kilometer pipeline with the Kremlin can’t be stopped?

The U.S. touts its \$3.7 billion in assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia’s war in 2014. Big deal. It gives \$4 billion a year in defense aid to Israel, whose economy has grown so much that it doesn’t need it. And the aid brings little clout. Israel evicts Palestinians from their homes to expand illegal Jewish settlements. Then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bombs Hamas into submission. And the U.S. helps pay on both ends – for the bombs and reconstructing destroyed Palestinian homes.

Yet in Ukraine, where right and wrong is clear, the West courts global disaster by doing too little to stop Russia or force Putin to reverse course.

Until the West realizes that the dictators in Russia, Belarus and elsewhere are enemies of global security, expect more wars and attacks on the West, all under the cloak of disinformation and emboldened by the Western wimps in power today who put commerce ahead of democratic principles.

# Appeasing dictators

The European Union did something more than express “deep concern” over Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko’s May 23 interception of a commercial plane so that he could arrest one of his most prominent critics onboard.

The EU curbed air travel with Belarus, as Ukraine has done, to back up its demand for the release of prominent Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega. They were arrested and jailed in Minsk, where the flight was diverted. It had been flying from Athens to Vilnius and was 10 minutes from its Lithuanian destination when the skyjacking took place with a Belarusian fighter jet and a fake bomb scare.

Europe will now apply personal and sectoral economic sanctions.

It took Europe 26 years to push back harder against a power-hungry dictator who is trying to turn his nation of 9 million people into a gulag. Lukashenko and his Russian patron, Vladimir Putin, haven’t changed. They’ve always been murderous tyrants. Yet, for over two decades Europe had a business-as-usual approach with Ukraine’s neighboring autocrats. Under Lukashenko’s watch, political opponents disappeared. Reports have surfaced of Belarus dictator employing a death squad to hunt down those who dared to oppose him.

In August, Lukashenko falsified his sixth presidential election, imprisoned political opponents – Sergey Tikhanovsky, Viktor Babariko and Maria Kolesnikova – and tortured people who took the streets in protest.

As of now, there are 436 political prisoners, while reports of people dying in custody have been surfacing on a regular basis.

Belarus’s dictator doesn’t act alone. He needs Putin’s patronage.

Russia also gets off lightly for its repression at home and imperialism abroad, which has included wars in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria, as well as complicity in the destruction of the Malaysian Airlines MH17 flight on July 17, 2015, killing 298 innocents aboard.

Instead, Europe insists on separating business from politics, building a natural gas pipeline on the bones of those killed by the Russian regime.

Lukashenko undertook the plane hijacking because he calculated he could get away with it. It’s up to the West to prove him – and Putin – wrong.



**NEWS ITEM:** President Volodymyr Zelenskyy gave on May 20 his annual press conference in front of a huge model of Ukraine’s world-famous Antonov An-124 Ruslan plane. After two years at the presidential office, Zelenskyy defended his political record in front of journalists in a theatrical set.



**NEWS ITEM:** Famous strength athlete Vasyl Virastyuk won the by-elections in a constituency in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast in April and was supposed to join parliament as a lawmaker with the Servant of the People party. However, due to alleged vote rigging, the results of the elections have been canceled by the Supreme Court. The Central Election Commission has appealed, and Virastyuk is now awaiting the final decision.



**NEWS ITEM:** After earning fifth place in this year’s Eurovision song contest finale, the Ukrainian electro-folk band Go\_A is continuing to gain momentum. Its song “Shum” has gone viral on the music streaming platform Spotify. Ukrainian bands have a long habit of stealing the show in the contest, like Verka Serduchka, who earned second place in 2007 and became one of Ukrainian top acts abroad.



**NEWS ITEM:** Ukraine has suspended air travel with Belarus. The measures came after Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko ordered on May 23 a Ryanair passenger plane – flying from Athens to Vilnius – to land in Minsk to arrest Belarusian dissident and journalist Roman Protasevich. Belarus blamed the Palestinian militant group Hamas for making a bomb threat and thus prompting a passenger plane to be diverted to Minsk. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum denied his group had any knowledge or connection.

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

## Ukraine’s Friend & Foe Of The Week



**Robert Habeck**  
Ukraine can only hope that Germany’s Green Party comes to power in the September elections. Habeck, visiting Ukraine this week, said he’s against Vladimir Putin’s pet Nord Stream 2 pipeline and he’s for supplying Ukraine with defensive weapons to help it prevail against Russia’s war



**Ivan Savvidis**  
The Russian-Greek billionaire is openly violating European Union sanctions against doing business in Russian-occupied Crimea. He is also a big supporter of the Kremlin dictator, according to an EU Observer investigation by Andrew Rettman.

**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.

# Zelensky was right to liquidate Pavlo Vovk's notorious court



Mikheil Saakashvili

This month, the Kyiv District Administrative Court — ordered to be liquidated by President Volodymyr Zelensky — suspended former Minister Infrastructure Vladyslav Kryklii's order to abolish the mandatory confirmation of sailors' qualifications. The decision was delivered by Judge Kyrylo Garnyk. In light of such a twist, I would like to emphasize again the urgent need for judicial reform.

Garnyk did not respond to a request for comment.

## \$120 million in losses

In April, Zelensky submitted a bill to liquidate the notorious Kyiv District Administrative Court. The court's chairman, Pavlo Vovk, has been charged in a corruption case and has become the epitome of injustice and impunity for Ukrainian society.

I have previously written on the essence of sailor reform, but here is a brief reminder. According to domestic Ukrainian law, the only

## Order to cancel test

In April Kryklii signed an order canceling the testing, where it is not needed, and eliminating the human factor, which is an opportunity for corruption. According to international practice, this order introduced the possibility for seafarers to prove their qualifications through their work experience, without having to pass mandatory tests. For sailors who do not have enough experience, the human examiner has been replaced with computer testing, which is also being developed in line with the international system CES6.0. Although unpopular, Kryklii's move against overregulation was instrumental in helping to bring the much-needed reform to life. It was only a matter of time though until someone like Garnyk would appear on the scene to block the liberalization.

## Was judge bribed?

I believe that Garnyk could have been bribed to deliver the court decision. As a result, 150,000 sailors and their families, instead of spending money on their children, apartments, and taxes, will be forced to pay a bribe of 6–7 months' salary. And that happened only because one person — Garnyk — decided that their poverty should persist.

Sailors and their families, who spend between \$2,000 and \$12,000 every five years in bribes to obtain work permits, should know how the Garnyk mafia makes money at their expense. Every family that he made less well off with his decision to block Kryklii's reform should know where the money is going. The money made through corruption schemes must be returned, including through the confiscation of his property.

I don't believe that this judge decided something himself, as is usually the case here. Ukraine is ruled by an octopus. Presidents, prime ministers, and ministers come and go, but this octopus always retains its powers. Garnyk is just one piece of a puzzle in the army of judges, prosecutors, and tax collectors who serve this octopus, and who are part of the conspiracy that makes Ukraine the poorest country in terms of GDP in Europe. No one stands out, and everyone is the same as him. The entire justice system in Ukraine is the same as one of its representatives.

## Arrogant mocking

They all are extremely arrogant and openly mock us because they are fabulously rich. With the help of this stolen, not earned, wealth, they gain pride, impudence, and a sense of complete impunity. But they will pay for their crimes sooner than they expect.



Demonstrators protest Judge Kyrylo Garnyk's suspension of a decision to abolish a mandatory examination of sailors' qualifications outside the Kyiv Court of Appeals on May 26, 2021. The hearing was postponed. Sailors say the exam is rife with corruption.

## Garnyk's assets

Let's look at some numbers. Garnyk's family own three apartments with an area of 424 square meters in Kyiv and Odesa, as well as a 335 square meter apartment in the elite village of Sauvignon (Odesa). According to civic activists, the value of the house is estimated to be at least \$500,000. Moreover, his expenses exceed his income by Hr 2.7 million, according to Garnyk's asset declarations for 2011–2020.

But the problem is not even only this specific judge. Before the said decision, for 10 days, the entire administrative apparatus had been

ignoring Kryklii's order. They said that they needed to closely analyze it, or that they had not "received it" yet, etc. Through such actions, they showed complete disrespect for the minister and the Ukrainian state as such. All such officials must be removed.

## Awaiting appeal

On May 26, a court of appeals postponed consideration of the allegations against Garnyk and the validity of his court ruling, and I hope a right and most importantly — just and transparent — a decision will be made.

In the meantime, I urge Ukrainian

society to come to Garnyk's house and tell him in the presence of his neighbors and family, to shame him for what he has done. Of course, this will not change him, but it will be a timely reminder that everyone who dares to further destroy Ukraine through corruption and greed will be brought to responsibility.

*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.*

“

Judge stands in the way of a solution for stopping a corruption scheme that costs sailors' families \$120 million annually.

”

Mikheil Saakashvili

way for sailors to prove qualifications (and re-confirm diplomas) is to take examinations at the State Qualification Commission, which creates corruption risks that generate \$120 million in losses annually.

After long work and a lot of resistance from corrupt officials, the team of my Office of Simple Solutions and Results, together with sailors and the team of Kryklii, developed a draft amendment to the existing procedure for confirming the qualifications of sailors. The experience of many developed countries shows that any sailor can confirm their qualifications with work experience over the past five years. Ukrainian sailors have been seeking the opportunity to confirm their diploma with approved seagoing service for years and now, finally, such an opportunity appeared, thanks to the draft order signed by Kryklii in April. We canceled oral and written testing and made it possible for sailors to confirm their qualifications, provided they have sufficient work experience.

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# In former battlefields, local deminers make Donbas safer

By Illia Ponomarenko  
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**NOVOLUHANSKE, Ukraine** — Oleksandr Hordiyenko, a young man with tattoos all over his arms, kneels in a line of trees in the Donbas war zone.

A blue armored vest squeezes his body and a plastic face shield burdens his head but he keeps his breath steady. Slowly, carefully, he puts a probe — a plastic fishing rod — into a heap of dry leaves and grass on the ground.

He turns over every inch in front of him, gradually working his way forward. All attention is on the probe's white tip that may reveal what a naked eye would surely miss — a booby trap tripwire.

He exhales: this patch of ground looks clear. Now he has to scan it with a metal detector and move on. Thirty centimeters ahead, he has to do it all again.

Hordiyenko is one of many locals trained and employed by HALO Trust, a Scottish charity that does humanitarian demining in conflict zones across the world, including the Donbas.

Since it began in 2014, Russia's ongoing war here has claimed 14,000 lives and left a legacy that may claim many more in decades to come.

Tens of thousands of landmines, booby traps and unexploded projectiles still lurk throughout the depopulated war zone, often next to its rare islands of life. Time and again, they kill and dismember both soldiers and civilians who never expect to run into a death trap so far away from the front line.

Like Hordiyenko, dozens of locals work for HALO to help clear their home areas. The job entails years of crawling on all fours, scrutinizing every part of old battlefields. This is the only way to make sure that another child isn't erased by an unmarked landmine on the outskirts of their village.

## Killing fields

The organization employs nearly 400 locals working all along the 420-kilometer front line.

Many of them ask not to be photographed or identified in the media — they do not want trouble

Volodymyr Petrov



A HALO Trust deminer works in a dense grove in the war zone of Donbas near the village of Novoluhanske on April 30, 2021. According to Ukraine's military, an area of 16,000 square kilometers is contaminated with hazardous explosive objects as a result of Russia's war

for their relatives in the Russian-occupied zone.

The Kodema-Novoluhanske team in Donetsk Oblast, not far from the city of Bakhmut, works in a wood line that runs along a dirt trail leading to the town of Travneve, the final frontier controlled by Ukraine. The front line is five kilometers to the south, across an empty steppe.

The area is marked with dozens of signs painted with red skulls and the words "Halt! Landmines!"

The deminers take a short break. An elderly cyclist rides past the team, headed to the nearby village of Semihirya, probably to visit the only grocery store in many kilometers.

"Alright, back to hazardous work now!" a group leader shouts and blows a whistle as the old man leaves the area.

The deminers don their face shields and pour back into dry foliage beneath the bushes. The silent

hunt for booby traps resumes.

At first glimpse, their meticulous grunting over every square meter seems to make no sense. But this is a dangerous misconception.

This area was once the scene of fierce fighting between the Ukrainian military and the combined forces of Russia and the militants it sponsors during the major Battle of Debaltseve in early 2015.

Heavy artillery exchanges left dozens, if not thousands of unexploded shells scattered in the fields. Infantry planted scores of booby traps and anti-tank landmines in the woods and on dirt trails.

Years later, stories of people getting their legs blown off are common in these parts.

One tractor driver was dismembered when he struck an anti-tank landmine in a nearby field, the same field he used to harvest just a year earlier.

Another local resident went missing for weeks during winter. His mutilated body finally turned up during the spring thaw. It looked like the man got off a bus, strayed from his usual path home and walked into an OZM-72 landmine, which filled him with shrapnel.

In the town of Novoluhanske a few kilometers away, a local man had a quarrel with his wife and stormed out of his house. He soon returned, half-conscious and covered in blood, begging for help. He shortly died in an ambulance, also killed by an OZM-72.

Three service members of Ukraine's 59th Motorized Brigade were killed on the spot when they stuck an anti-tank landmine on the road near Novoluhanske on Feb. 14,

2021. Two other soldiers of Ukraine's 30th Mechanized Brigade were also killed by an unmarked explosive device in March 2015, in the same patch of wood where the HALO deminers now work.

## Bringing back life

In many villages near the front line, children grow up with one basic rule: never go into groves.

"We coach ordinary people on personal safety," says Dariya Bohovarova, a HALO deminer originally from Novoluhanske. "Locals know best where potential dangers are. Kids know that if they find something that looks like a hazardous device, they have to walk away the same way they came and immediately call for adults."

In spite of the precautions, people are killed almost every month.

According to Ukraine's military, nearly 2,600 civilians, including over 240 children, have been killed by various explosive objects since 2014.

In Donbas, an area of nearly 16,000 square kilometers is contaminated with unmarked landmines and other hazardous devices, making Ukraine one of the world's most dangerous countries in this regard.

Recently, HALO's Novoluhanske-Kodema team successfully detected three wired grenades in this area.

"Booby traps are the worst," says the group's senior supervisor, Andriy Kryvokon. "Very keen attention and sight are required (to spot them.) Just imagine a wild field of tall bushes and grass that hasn't been touched in years. A wire is very hard to notice."

Traps may become more dangerous with time. If a bomb is cocked

with a simple fishing line, weather and wildfires can eventually rot it away.

If copper wire is used, the trap can survive indefinitely. The team knows of a local woman whose legs were blown up with an F1 grenade connected to a tripwire, planted in the field at least three years earlier.

The team's operational map is speckled with dots marking every hazardous object detected and secured. Since 2017, it has found over 60 anti-vehicle and anti-personnel landmines and over 100 unexploded projectiles and traps in the Novoluhanske area alone.

Many explosives are probably still out there.

As deminers say, each mark on their maps represents a driver, a fisherman or a gardener coming home safe.

Kryvokon, a former Ukrainian military minesweeper, walks back to his car across a large field after inspecting his team in the grove.

This giant square of black soil is the pride of his career. It was once a scary wilderness, littered with bombs. Now that his team has swept them out, people don't have to watch their step here anymore.

"I'd love to see tractors harvesting crops in this field again," he says as he puts his sweaty armored vest into his trunk.

"You know, we have spots where a family has a patch of land and no other way to earn a living. We can come and help demine their kitchen garden, and this gives these people a chance."

"You help bring life back to these parts — and that is the coolest thing about this job." ☺

Volodymyr Petrov



HALO Trust team senior supervisor Anriy Kryvokon demonstrates a typical booby trap wire near the Donbas war zone village of Novoluhanske on April 30, 2021. The team conducts humanitarian demining missions throughout the war-torn region.

# WHO's Habicht: Ukrainians are coming around to vaccinations

By Anna Myroniuk  
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Ukraine has had one of the weakest responses to the coronavirus pandemic in the world.

Its vaccination campaign, whose start date was delayed by two months, is crawling along at a snail's pace. Only 2.4% of Ukrainians have gotten their first dose and less than 1% have been fully vaccinated. At this rate, it will take years to inoculate the whole population.

Can Ukraine do better? Jarno Habicht, the head of the World Health Organization's office in the country, thinks it can.

"I really hope that we can kind of scale up," Habicht said. "I am very, very optimistic."

Ukraine's new Health Minister Viktor Lyashko promised to provide vaccine jabs to 5 million more Ukrainians by September. Today, about 1 million have gotten their first dose.

Lyashko's plan is less ambitious than the National Vaccination Plan, which called for vaccinating 2.8 million people per month starting in April. But it still ran into a skeptical parliament, which saw it as unrealistic.

Ukraine's main stumbling block is insufficient vaccine supplies, Habicht believes. As of May 27, Ukraine has received 3.5 million doses of the vaccine, 1.1 million of which have already been used up.

Habicht believes Ukraine will be able to accelerate the vaccination drive in June, as more doses arrive.

Ukraine is expecting to receive 19 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine on the top of the 117,000 doses that arrived this week. NovaVax will supply 10 million doses to Ukraine and 1.5 million more doses will come from AstraZeneca.

COVAX, the global coronavirus vaccine alliance, will provide Ukraine with 16 million doses, almost 960,000 of which have already been delivered.

And multiple counties and organizations agreed to share vaccines with Ukraine or fund their purchase. They include Poland, Lithuania and the World Bank.

## Ukraine's response

Ukraine was slow partly because it fell victim to "vaccine diplomacy," Habicht said. He believes it's not Ukraine's fault that some deliveries have been halted, like the AstraZeneca vaccines from India's Serum Institute. India stopped exports in late April to meet domestic demand, which means Ukraine only got 500,000 out of 2 million it ordered.

"I think Ukraine has been under pressure because, looking at the neighboring European Union countries who started their vaccination programs two months before, I think,



Jarno Habicht, the World Health Organization representative in Ukraine and head of the country office, speaks to the Kyiv Post in central Kyiv on May 13, 2020.

Oleg Petrasuk

generated a lot of expectations to start earlier. And the vaccines became available only at the end of February," Habicht said.

The WHO representative believes Ukraine's authorities did a good job under the circumstances.

"I think everybody has been criticized. There have been those who do not want to get vaccinated -- they are criticized, and those who do not provide care fast enough -- they are, too. And I think it is the same with the Ministry (of Health)," Habicht said.

Habicht said

The representative complimented the vaccination plan, first created in January and updated in mid-April, in which Ukraine committed itself to give 47 million shots by the end of the year.

He also welcomed the launch of mobile vaccination teams, the pending introduction of community mental health services and the idea to use leftover vaccines on patients.

However, he acknowledged that there were failures, such as the decision to give leftover vaccines exclusively to celebrities and opinion leaders. This project ended after a few weeks.

"It was not reaching the target group at the time, which were the health care workers who needed to get protected so that they could continue to provide care as well as the other frontliners in the list" he said.

Habicht also criticized the government's decision to spend the COVID-19 fund on road construction and production of patriotic movies.

"If the government has allocated funds to health, I would always like to see actually it goes to the health sector," Habicht said.

## Leaving no one behind

Demand for vaccines is rising, according to new WHO research.

"We see actually that many of those who were not interested in vaccination, have become interested in the past months," Habicht said.

According to him, the proportion of willing Ukrainians increased from 48% in March to 54% by the end of April.

"There is potential to have even more Ukrainians interested in vaccination, because there are those

whose friends and families are getting vaccinated," Habicht said.

In fact, the WHO found that people in Ukraine have a higher level of interest in vaccination than the average in Europe.

According to Habicht, the next task for the government is to ensure that everyone who wants a shot has access to it. This means taking into account people's special needs, such as transportation.

"They might not have means... might not have resources for the transport, they have not been reached out to, they might not read the digital media. And then they might have questions," he added.

According to Habicht, Ukraine should focus on making vaccines accessible even to remote populations.

"We see from preliminary data, more than 5% of Kyiv Oblast and Kyiv city are already getting vaccinated with the first dose -- a very good result. But in some oblasts, it's around 1%," Habicht said.

According to the Health Ministry's website, Luhansk and Chernivtsi Oblasts gave the fewest number of shots while the capital city administered five times as much.

"It is important that we ensure equity across all oblasts," he said. "We cannot leave pockets of unvaccinated people." 🇺🇦



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# Putin swallows Belarus



Diane Francis

The Cold War 2.0 just got a whole lot worse with the May 23 hijacking of a commercial jetliner in order to abduct, torture, then imprison an exiled 26-year-old, baby-faced Belarusian activist named Roman Protasevich. It was the act of Putin's proxy – Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko – and reinforces the need for U.S. President Joe Biden to reverse his recent decision to pull his punches in stopping Putin's pet project, Nord Stream 2. This was another Putin-linked attack that must be addressed.

## Puppet leader

“Like every puppet leader, Lukashenko doesn't use the bathroom without asking for Moscow's permission. It's fanciful to imagine he'd hijack a flight between NATO allies without Moscow's blessing. Putin's regime is emboldened because the U.S. dropped our sanctions against his treasured Nord Stream 2 pipeline. We should impose those sanctions tonight,” said U.S. Senator Ben Sasse, a member of the Senate Committee on Intelligence, on May 25.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus since 1994 with an iron hand until two seminal events occurred in his “neighborhood”: In 2004, Ukraine's Orange Revolution overthrew the country's rigged election. In 2014, Ukraine's EuroMaidan Revolution overthrew its Russian puppet, President Viktor Yanukovich. Within weeks, Russia invaded but Ukrainians were able to repel total recapture. Even so, Russia was able to annex Crimea and occupy part of the Donbas, roughly 7 percent of Ukraine.

That defiance, as well as Ukraine's

success in gradually becoming more democratic and open, was noted by Belarusians, including its despotic dictator Lukashenko. Half Ukrainian himself, he, and the president of Kazakhstan both surprisingly and publicly criticized Putin's seizure and annexation of Crimea in 2014, and their fates – along with those of their peoples – were sealed. Ever since then, Putin began to tighten the screws on Belarus. The next target is Kazakhstan, another former Soviet republic, which is bigger than all of Western Europe.

## Ukraine's example

Belarusians watched as Ukraine was able to handle the ongoing hot war against Russian military operatives in Donbas, and as it obtained aid from the West as well as access to trade and visas in the European Union. Its exports and opportunities boomed. By 2019, Ukrainians held a truly free election and elected a reform-minded new president and its minimum wages overtook those in Belarus and Russia – a poke in the eye of the Russian Bear as well as its Baby Bear in Minsk.

That's when Putin moved to stop the possible “democratic contagion” and proposed merger talks with Lukashenko. He labeled it euphemistically as a “two-state solution” but it was, in essence, a soft annexation. Lukashenko played along, buying time, without much success. On Jan 20, 2020, I wrote that Belarus was clearly “Putin's Next Target” in the Atlantic Council's UkraineAlert publication and for the Kyiv Post.

As Lukashenko was being squeezed, he began to shift, ever so slightly. He halted vicious crackdowns. He began delivering speech-



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) meets his Belarusian counterpart, Alexander Lukashenko, in Moscow on April 22, 2021.

es in Belarusian, not Russian. He reached out timidly to Europe and NATO and refused Putin's request to let him build Russian military bases inside Belarus, up against its borders with NATO members Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. This virtue signaling was picked up by Western countries, the press, Belarusian democracy advocates, and the United States which re-opened its embassy in Minsk closed for years due to Lukashenko's human rights abuses.

## Demands merger

But the shift – to get out from under Russia's grip not to become a liberal democracy – was most importantly noticed by Putin. In 2019, Putin began running out of patience and his suggestion to merge became a demand, fortified by Russia's cutting

off oil and gas to Belarus in January 2020. Presumably, Lukashenko argued effectively to postpone any resolution until after the August 2020 election in Belarus and local political opposition and peaceful street protests grew.

## Moscow saves him

Lukashenko was defeated, then rigged the results, which also didn't work. Protests became immense, but, unlike Ukraine's more powerful civil society, the Belarusians were beaten back as the result of a brutal crackdown. Lukashenko turned to Putin for help. Moscow loaned him \$1.5 billion but also sent in members of the Russian military and secret police, and cyber-warriors who took over the country's newspapers and the internet. They bathed Belarus in propaganda and also hunted and apprehended bloggers and activists like Protasevich, who fled to Poland and Lithuania.

## Under Russia's boot

What's most tragic is that Belarus's 9.5 million people face little prospect of getting out from under Russia's boot now. An official merger is inevitable and Putin has been able to swallow whole a country the size of Romania with an educated populace that has been abused throughout history. Landlocked, the country was ravaged, as was Ukraine and Kazakhstan, by Stalin's famine in the early 1930s, and then by the Nazis who killed 25 percent of Belarus's population; 100 percent of its Jewish citizens; destroyed 209 out of its 285 cities; and obliterated 85 percent of its industry, easily the hardest

hit among the former Soviet Union republics. Reeling from catastrophe, it was then controlled by a stern, Communist dictator who has delivered living standards lower than Peru's or Botswana's.

## Big disadvantages

Unlike Ukraine, Belarus lacks an enormous and active diaspora, or sizeable civil society, to help wrest itself free from the Soviet sphere. Their situation is no different than what's occurring in other former Soviet Republics such as Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia where the Kremlin has recaptured bits of territory and aims to slowly repossess them.

Belarus's high-profile activists and heroes have been driven into exile, but continue the fight remotely, in concert with democratic activists in the West. This is why Putin's proxy Lukashenko this month set an unconscionable and pernicious precedent by stalking and hijacking a commercial jet to arrest Protasevich. This crosses a red line that imperils exiled dissidents everywhere and will, unless internationally sanctioned and condemned, become a favored tactic of autocrats everywhere.

Putin's proxies, his pipelines, his oil, and his Kremlinocrats and cronies must be severely sanctioned by America and Europe. And Biden's meeting on June 16 with Putin in Geneva must be a showdown, not a summit.

Diane Francis, a Canadian-American author and journalist, is on the Kyiv Post's international advisory board. 🇺🇸

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# Lukashenko's reign of terror just added another chapter

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tions to protest his rigged Aug. 9 re-election, the Belarusian dictator has viciously broken up rallies and imprisoned opposition leaders and independent journalists.

Today, Belarus has 436 political prisoners, according to the Vyasna human rights group. Thirty five journalists are currently imprisoned in the country, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists. Lukashenko has also moved to block independent news outlets.

But not everyone who's been arrested for opposing Lukashenko has been recognized as a political prisoner. More than 3,000 criminal cases have been opened against protesters.

Despite the flurry of global attention to Lukashenko's latest move, the world seems to have forgotten about the falsified 2020 presidential election in which Lukashenko declared himself the winner, perpetuating his rule since 1994.

## Lukashenko unapologetic

But the international spotlight was back on Lukashenko after he ordered a MiG fighter to skyjack a civilian plane flying over Belarus so that he could abduct the journalist Protasevich and his girlfriend Sapega, who were both onboard.

The brazen and illegal action will further isolate Lukashenko. Western leaders moved to ban air travel with Belarus and enact tougher economic sanctions so that other dictators won't be tempted to do this again. The Belarusian president's only reliable patron and ally is Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, who stood by Lukashenko after the hijacking.

"Until now, everyone treated Belarusian problems as internal ones," Belarusian political analyst Valery Karbalevich told the Kyiv Post. "But now Belarus is considered to be a threat to international security."

Lukashenko, however, remained unapologetic, leading some to predict the appearance of a North Korea-like regime in the center of Europe. He seems to favor isolation from the rest of Europe, with measures to make it harder for dissidents to flee the country. In December, Belarus blocked people from leaving through overland routes other than to Russia, citing the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Final break with West

"The level of repression is unprecedented," Belarusian journalist Vitali Tsygankov told the Kyiv Post. "It can't even be compared with the late 1990s or 2010. Starting from last fall, repression has only been increasing."

Analysts say Lukashenko's latest actions imply a final break with the West, leading to Belarus becoming more dependent on Russia to the point of de facto annexation. Already, the military and police of the two countries have a high degree of integration and cooperation.

Lukashenko's ire stems from his

Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich makes a forced confession to organizing protests at a Belarusian detention center in a video posted by Nevolff, a pro-government Telegram channel, on May 25. Protasevich was en route from Athens to Vilnius when Belarusian authorities forced his plane to land in Minsk and abducted him and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega.



A demonstrator holds up a paper plane with the message "Free Belarus" and "Free Roman Protasevich" during a protest in front of a European Commission office in Warsaw on May 24, 2021. Protasevich and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega were abducted by the Belarusian regime from a plane traveling from Athens to Vilnius on May 23.

Telegram channel Nevolff/AFP

refusal to accept the will of the voters or leave power after 28 years. He claimed to have received 80 percent of the vote when he ran against his rival, Svetlana Tikhonovakaya. Evidence points to her winning with a likely 60 percent of the vote.

The sham election brought hundreds of thousands of protesters out into the streets to demand a new and fair election.

Thousands were arrested. Many were beaten and tortured. At least seven demonstrators have been killed during the protests.

## Hijacking

Belarusian journalist Protasevich and his Russian girlfriend Sapega were abducted from the plane traveling from Athens to Vilnius on May 23. The Ryanair plane was forced to land in Minsk after being intercepted by a Belarusian fighter jet. The plane was passing through Belarus's airspace and was 10 minutes away from the Lithuanian border. Belarusian authorities falsely claimed that the plane had a bomb on it.

In 2020, Protasevich was the chief editor of the Polish-based Belarusian Telegram channel NEXTA, which was founded by Stepan Putilo. NEXTA, which used to have more than 2 million subscribers at its peak in 2020, was the most influential independent news source during the anti-Lukashenko protests.

Later Protasevich quit NEXTA and became the chief editor of another Telegram channel, Belarus "Golovnogo Mozga" (which roughly translates to "Belarus of the brain" — an allusion to brain diseases), moving from Poland to Lithuania. In November, Belarusian authorities charged him in absentia with organizing riots.

"There were both rational and irrational motives," Karbalevich told the Kyiv Post of Lukashenko's actions. "The irrational one is revenge. But the authorities were also afraid that (the NEXTA and Belarus "Golovnogo Mozga" channels) could mobilize and coordinate protests. It was also a warning for all opposition centers abroad that they have a long reach."

The 26-year old Protasevich also used to be a photographer and an activist in Ukraine during the EuroMaidan Revolution, which overthrew then President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014.

## Arrested journalists

The abduction and jailing of Protasevich also brought into focus stepped-up repression against journalists in Belarus, where 35 members of the profession are imprisoned for doing their jobs.

"All media have been crushed, everything is blocked," Dzmitry Halko, an exiled Belarusian journalist based in Ukraine, told the Kyiv Post.

Recently the Belarusian authorities cracked down on Tut.by, Belarus's largest news site. In April tut.by had

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# At least 23 critics have been killed or died suspiciously since 1994

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3.3 million users, or 63 percent of all internet users in Belarus. On May 18, the authorities arrested 15 Tut.by journalists on tax evasion charges and shut down their site.

In December, several journalists of the Press Club, a non-governmental organization, were arrested on tax evasion charges. One of them, Ksenia Lutskina, worked at state-run television channel BT until August, when she joined a strike against Lukashenko, became a member of the opposition's coordination council and announced plans to create an opposition channel.

Another journalist, Andrei Aleksandrov, was arrested in January on charges of violating public order by helping activists pay fines imposed for their participation in protests.

In February Yekaterina Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova, journalists at television channel Belsat, were sentenced to two years in jail on charges of "violating public order" by streaming a police crackdown on protesters in Minsk. Andreyeva had also co-written a book devoted to Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine.

Journalist Denys Ivashin was arrested in March on charges of interfering in the activities of the police — a reference to his stories about Ukrainian Berkut police officers joining Belarus' police force.

Andrzej Poczobut, a journalist and member of Belarus' Union of Poles, was arrested in March on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and "rehabilitating Nazism." The irony is that the charges were brought for him supporting the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa), an anti-Nazi resistance movement.

Of the 35 journalists currently imprisoned, 11 are serving 15-day jail sentences in administrative cases on charges of failing to comply with police officers' requests.

The Belarusian authorities could also be implicated in killing journalists. In January, the EUobserver, a Brussels-based English-language publication, and the Belarusian People's Tribunal, an opposition group run by exiled Belarusian police officer Igor Makar, published a recording of alleged Belarusian KGB officials dis-

cussing murdering Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet. The recording was made in 2012, four years before Sheremet was killed in Kyiv.

## Repression rises

On May 24, Lukashenko also signed laws banning the publication of opinion polls not sanctioned by the state and hyperlinks to materials banned by the state. The laws also make it easier to ban online and print media: now they can be blocked by prosecutors and the Information Ministry.

The law also bans foreigners from co-owning media outlets, prohibits journalists from taking part in protests, bans journalists from covering protests not authorized by the government and prohibits anyone from helping to pay fines imposed for protests.

On May 25, five people were sentenced to jail terms ranging from four to seven years on charges of preparing riots: Pavel Severinets from the Belarusian Christian Democratic Party; Yevheny Afnagel, Pavel Yukhnevych and Maksim Vinyarsky from the European Belarus party; blogger Dmitry Kozlov, and Iryna Schastnaya, an activist and editor of opposition Telegram channels.

The Stalin-style show trial against the five was closed to the public. According to earlier statements by police officials, they were essentially jailed for peaceful opposition activities: calling for protests against the government and criticizing the authorities.

## Absurd sentences

Several people have been sentenced to jail terms of up to one and a half years on charges of insulting Lukashenko and other officials. These include Nikolai Chernyavsky, Alexei Romanov, Vladimir Chevazhevsky and Vladimir Shinkevich.

Numerous other people have been sentenced for "insulting" officials to a supposedly lighter form of punishment — one officially called "restrictions on liberty." It is colloquially known as "chemistry" since in the Soviet Union many who received this sentence worked at chemical factories.

This Orwellian punishment is widely practiced in Belarus: convicts are sentenced to compulsory

# 30 of 35 jailed journalists



Alla Sharko



Yekaterina Andreyeva



Daria Chulkova



Irina Kostyuchenko



Pyotr Slutsky



Alexander Daineka



Alexander Burakov



Oles Silich



Alyona Tolkachyova



Alla Lopatko



Andrei Aleksandrov



Andrei Avdeev



Andrzej Poczobut



Anzhela Asad



Artem Maerov



Ksenia Lutskina



Yekaterina Tkachenko



Denis Ivashin



Daria Danilava



Olga Loiko



Lyubov Kaspyarovich



Lyudmila Chekina



Marina Zolotova



Maria Novik



Mikhail Kashkan



Irina Rybalko



Ivan Kashkan



Yulia Slutskaya



Vladimir Laptsevich



Sergei Olshevsky



Belarusian opposition activist Pavel Severinets attends a court hearing in the city of Mogilyov on May 25. He and four other peaceful protest organizers were convicted of masterminding riots and sentenced to jail terms ranging from four to seven years.

labor at low-security prisons and can sometimes go out and return with the permission of the authorities. An alternative version of this penalty is essentially partial house arrest with compulsory labor under the strict control of the police.

However, the slightest violations can lead to such convicts being sent to regular prisons.

Meanwhile, a woman from the city of Ivatsevichi faces a jail term for posting a negative emoji in reference to a police officer on the internet.

## Murders

One of the political prisoners, Vitold

Ashurok, died in prison on May 21. In January he had been sentenced to five years on charges of violating the public order and violence against a law enforcement officer.

In one of his last letters, Ashurok wrote that prison authorities made him and other political prisoners wear yellow badges similar to those worn by Jews in Nazi death camps.

The prison authorities claimed that he had died of heart failure but there is speculation that he could have been killed. When Ashurok's body was handed over to his relatives, his head had bruises and was

bandaged.

Meanwhile, at least seven protesters were killed by the police during large-scale protests in 2020.

At least 23 critics of Lukashenko have been killed, disappeared or died in suspicious circumstances since he came to power in 1994.

"(Belarusian) law enforcement agencies consist of people ready to blindly follow any orders and sadists who like violence," Tsyganko said. "Starting from July, they were told that they could do whatever they want (to protesters) and that they would not be punished for it."

# Lukashenko meets Putin on May 28 as pressure builds

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decided it's finally had enough.

Ukraine and the European Union have banned Belarus from their airspace, advised airlines to avoid flying over Belarus and are ready to move forward with tougher sanctions to punish the rogue regime.

On May 23, a Ryanair flight passing over Belarus en route from Athens to Vilnius was intercepted by a Belarusian fighter jet. Belarusian authorities falsely claimed that the passenger plane had a bomb on it. Despite being 10 minutes from the Lithuanian border, the plane was forced to turn around and land in Minsk, where it was raided by Belarusian KGB agents.

Belarus authorities created the fake threat to kidnap prominent Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega.

"This was a case of state-sponsored hijacking... state-sponsored piracy," said Michael O'Leary, CEO of Ryanair.

Lukashenko blamed the incident on the Islamist militant group Hamas, later saying that the flight was targeting Belarus's nuclear power plant.

Europe was having none of it. On May 24, the European Council announced that it will ban Belarus's state-owned airline Belavia from entering European airspace and promised economic sanctions.

"The hijacking of the Ryanair plane by the Belarus regime is an attack on democracy. An attack on freedom of expression. An attack on European sovereignty," said Ursula von der Leyen, the head of the European Commission, after the meeting.

Von der Leyen promised more sanctions to follow.

Ukraine banned all flights to and from Belarus, effectively cutting the country off from the democratic world starting May 26.

Still, Lukashenko is holding strong. While he's an outcast in Europe, he remains a welcome guest in Russia, where he's expected to meet President Vladimir Putin on May 28.

Belarus shares a 1,239-kilometer border with Russia, which has promised to keep Lukashenko's regime

afloat. Russia has invested financially and politically into Belarus and is now keen to maintain the pariah state in its grip.

"Russia, of course, will not leave Belarus in trouble," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Indeed, Russia has already started supporting its ally. When Air France and Austrian Airlines planes tried to enter Russia by flying around Belarus, they were denied entry.

## Mad abduction

When Belarusian authorities ordered the Ryanair flight to land, their only goal appeared to have been the abduction of Protasevich.

The journalist co-founded the NEXTA Telegram channel, which served as a primary independent news source in Belarus during last year's demonstrations seeking to overturn the results of the presidential election, rigged by Lukashenko, the country's authoritarian ruler since 1994.

After Protasevich and Sapega were abducted from the plane, a video of Protasevich was published by a low-profile Telegram channel linked to Lukashenko on May 25.

In the video, the journalist "confesses" to being involved in organizing mass protests in Belarus, which began after Lukashenko was crowned the winner of a rigged presidential election in August.

The journalist's statement appears to have been extracted under duress. He has reportedly been denied a lawyer.

"It's likely his nose is broken because the shape of it has changed and there's a lot of powder on it," Protasevich's father Dmitry Protasevich told Reuters. "I think he was forced (to confess)."

A day later, a similar video involving Sapega appeared.

To justify grounding the plane, Lukashenko issued false, easily disprovable statements.

Authorities in Belarus claimed they were responding to a bomb threat from Hamas. They later faked an email to back up their claims. Yet the fake email was sent 24 minutes after the Minsk air control tower ordered the plane to land in Minsk, citing bomb threats.



Members of the Belarusian diaspora in Ukraine display the white-red flags that were abolished when Lukashenko came to power during a rally outside the Foreign Ministry in Kyiv on May 23, 2021. The protesters demanded that the Ukrainian government act to secure the release of detained journalist Roman Protasevich.

Hamas publicly denied involvement.

## Europe's tough stand

The international community is well aware that Lukashenko falsified election results and tortured his political opponents in prison. But when he hijacked the plane, he appeared to have crossed a red line for Europe, causing it to react with unprecedented toughness.

Air travel over Belarus was halted, sanctions are in the works and calls for Lukashenko to go have intensified.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called the incident "an act of state terrorism."

According to von der Leyen, the EU will sanction individuals involved in the hijacking, businesses that finance Lukashenko's regime and Belarus's aviation sector. Belavia has been banned from entering the sky over Europe. Belarus is expected to lose at least \$50–70 million in tariffs after turning into a European no-fly zone.

"We have a 3 billion euro economic and investment package ready to go for Belarus, when it becomes democratic," von der Leyen said.

According to Rikard Jozwiak, an editor at Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, "the sanctions package on Belarus should be adopted in June. Listings of people responsible for the forced landing of the Ryanair flight should also be done then."

"Sectoral sanctions will probably take a bit longer, but the aim is to have it done before the EU summer break in August," he added.

## Ukraine in the middle

Ukraine's response came even faster — the country condemned Belarusian authorities and banned flights over Belarus starting May 26.

"Belarusian authorities will stop at nothing to persecute dissenters. Even its airspace is unsafe now," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba wrote on Twitter. "Ukraine has always been interested in a democratic Belarus where human rights are respected."

On the same day, Ukraine banned electricity imports from Russia and Belarus until Oct. 1. While not directly tied to the recent events, electricity imports were one of Belarus's main exports to Ukraine, the other being oil products, mostly diesel.

Ukraine remains heavily dependent on energy products from Belarus and Russia and it is unlikely that Ukraine will sever all economic ties with its rogue neighbor.

In the first quarter of 2021, Ukraine exported \$306 million worth of goods to Belarus and received \$863.7 million worth of goods in return. More than half of Ukraine's import was oil products.

Belarus controls 35.4% of Ukraine's diesel market and Russia

controls an additional 30%. Shutting down imports would cause a substantial deficit.

Less vital, yet still crucial, are electricity imports.

Valery Tarasyuk, head of the National Energy and Utilities Regulatory Commission, said that Ukraine may resume electricity imports from Belarus in October.

After restarting the import of electricity from the two countries in 2019, the regulator halted imports again in April 2020. However, the regulator lifted the ban in December, due to winter power shortages.

## Cornered dictator

Despite economic and political pressure from the West, Lukashenko's totalitarian regime remains out of Europe's reach, as it's heavily propped up by Putin's Russia.

Lukashenko is expected to meet Putin on May 28.

"We'll (discuss) economic questions, how to move forward so that our economy doesn't crumble," said Lukashenko before the meeting.

Even before the rigged August election, Russia was Belarus' main debt holder and had been responsible for over 40% of direct investments in the country.

Russia has supported Belarus' regime by supplying it with cheap oil and gas, which Belarus refined and sold to the EU and Ukraine.

Russia has also issued loans to Belarus, which it never paid back. In September 2020, a month after Lukashenko falsified presidential elections and tortured protesters, Russia provided Lukashenko with a new \$1.5 billion loan.

In 2017, an International Monetary Fund report concluded that the Belarusian economy gets \$9 billion in direct and indirect aid per year from Russia, keeping the country afloat.

In recent months, the assistance has increased, despite Belarus's growing number of political prisoners.

Sapega, who is a Russian citizen, was abducted from the plane and is being kept in a Belarusian prison. Five days after her arrest, Russia is expected to provide additional economic and political assistance to Lukashenko. 🇷🇺

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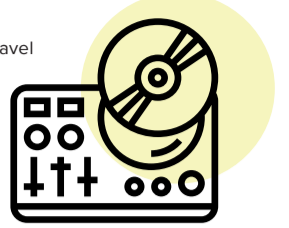
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# Lifestyle

Outdoor disco party with Pavel Plastikk and Philipp Markovich behind the decks will shake the terrace of Vsi Svoi D12 (12 Desiatynna St.) on May 29 at 6 p.m. - 10 p.m. Entrance - Hr 150



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## Molodist festival celebrates young cinema for 50 years

Molodist KIFF



Ukrainian director Oksana Voitenko (L) receives an award for her debut short film "Hideout," the winner of the National Competition program, during the awards ceremony of the 49th Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival on Aug. 30, 2020. Molodist has been a welcoming platform for young filmmakers since it was founded in 1970.

By Daria Shulzhenko  
shulzhenko@kyivpost.com

**M**olodist is not just Ukraine's oldest film festival. It has been breaking cinematic ground for 50 years, and its influence extends far beyond Ukrainian borders.

By supporting rising filmmakers, Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival, whose name means "youth" in Ukrainian, shone the spotlight on many talents, who would later be recognized by the whole world — from Oscar-winning Belgian director Alain Berliner to British director Danny Boyle, the creator of "Trainspotting." "Molodist is the most important festival of debut film in the world," Ukrainian film critic Oleksandr Gusev told the Kyiv Post. "Through the years, this festival has been introducing young filmmakers and young viewers to the pearls of the cinema world."

At this year's annual screening, Molodist will continue promoting fresh and experimental films, touching on modern society's sore subjects and giving a platform for taboo topics.

The festival will kick off on May 29 in Kyiv and run through June 6 with screenings of nearly 200 films accompanied by English and Ukrainian subtitles.

### Revolutionary event

The history of Molodist traces back to Soviet Ukraine, when in 1970, a group of enthusiasts from the Kyiv State Institute of Theatrical Arts founded a festival for students to present their first cinematic pieces.

The first Molodist featured films shot in 1965–1970 by students of the cinematography faculty but it soon made a buzz throughout all of Ukraine and other Soviet countries, becoming a cross-border platform for young directors.

"Filmmakers from all around the Soviet Union were coming to us," Andriy Khalpakhchi, the head of Molodist since 1992, told the Kyiv Post.

It was the time when all spheres, cinema included, were under the sway of the Soviet authorities. But Molodist resisted spreading the regime's propaganda and spotlighted films that were different.

The 1979 festival's winner, drama "Babylon XX" by legendary Ukrainian filmmaker and actor Ivan Mykolaichuk was one of such pieces. The film portrays how a small Ukrainian village resists the revolutionary Red Army.

Mykolaichuk, who directed and also played the main role in the film, was highly criticized by Soviet authorities and yet it didn't stop Molodist from giving him its highest award.

"The festival made it possible to take a step towards the freedom of thought and communication, something that was not typical for the Soviet Union," Khalpakhchi says.

As an acknowledgment of Mykolaichuk's contribution and talent, his "Babylon XX" will open the 50th edition of the festival.

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union brought freedom not just to Ukraine but to Molodist as well. Soon after independence, the festival embarked on the journey of becoming an international event, which it achieved in 1993. Filmmakers from all around the globe started sending their applications to participate in

the festival.

In Ukraine, meanwhile, Molodist quickly became a hit among cinephiles as one of few events at the time bringing new rare films to the screen. According to Khalpakhchi, the screenings were so popular that people were breaking windows of Kyiv's Cinema House, trying to get to the festival by any means.

"The whole world was interested in the newly independent country and that helped us a lot. We have become the signature piece of Ukraine in the cultural world," Khalpakhchi says.

### Progressiveness engine

Achieving international status didn't turn Molodist conservative. The festival continued to develop, pushing itself and the local community towards a new level of progressiveness.

One of its boldest decisions was launching "Sunny Bunny," a program specializing in LGBTQ-related films, in 2001.

Khalpakhchi says he was inspired

## City Life

With Agatha Gorski  
1agatagorski@gmail.com

### 8 movies for watching at 2021 Molodist film festival

Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival has not quaked under the pressure of the pandemic — it will open on May 29 for its 50th annual screening.

The event will run through June 6 featuring Ukrainian and foreign films in its competition and non-competition blocks. All screenings will provide both English and Ukrainian subtitles.

As usual, Molodist is all about underground, contemporary, art house cinema, offering movie enthusiasts a carefully crafted setlist of 200 films in 18 categories.

Aside from film screenings, Molodist will hold a variety of workshops and parties.

Cinema lovers can purchase a regular pass for Hr 1,000 (\$36) or a student pass for Hr 500 (\$18), which give access to all festival events. Individual movie tickets are also available for Hr 80-230 (\$3-8).

Before purchasing tickets, moviegoers can explore the program on Molodist's website and select the films to watch. The Kyiv Post has picked out eight of the worthiest pictures at this year's festival.

### 'Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn'

The big statement film of this year's Molodist is a contemporary Romanian satire about a school-teacher's sex tape scandal. The winner of the Golden Bear at the 2021 Berlin International Film Festival, or Berlinale, Radu Jude's "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn" is funny, provocative and at times absurd, according to many critics' reviews. Set in the era of COVID-19 frustration and ongoing internet slut-shaming, the film follows Romanian teacher Emi, who faces school sacking and an angry mob of parents after a private sex video of Emi and her husband goes viral. The film is graphic, at times extreme, and is likely to offend. But that's precisely the point. In a world where people are eager to discuss others' sex lives, all while turning a blind eye to real-world issues, the comedy is a slap at the hypocrisy and pettiness of modern society.

Zhovten (26 Kostiantynivska St.) June 3. 7 p.m. June 4. 6 p.m. Hr 120

### 'Where are you going, Aida?'

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## City Life

# Festival selection offers art house cinematic look

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This Oscar-nominated war drama by Bosnian filmmaker Jasmila Žbanić takes the audience back to the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. The tragedy is told through the eyes of Aida, a former teacher working as a United Nations translator amid the Bosnian war. When a UN safe zone falls under siege of Serb forces, Aida's position offers her protection but leaves her husband and two sons amongst 8,000 Bosnian refugees about to face death at the hands of Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladić. According to reviews, Jasna Duricic brilliantly portrays the desperate struggle of Aida, a mother and wife, to save her family as the massacre dawns on the refugee camp. *Oscar (1A Sportyvna Square). May 31. 7 p.m. Hr 150. Zhovten (26 Kostiantynivska St.) June 5. 4 p.m. Hr 80*

## 'Natural Light'

This World War II drama is far from being a typical, action-packed recollection of battles. Instead, "Natural Light" follows a somewhat questionable protagonist through a chilling journey on the Eastern Front. The story is set in 1943 in the icy forests of the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union (filmed in Ukraine), where Hungarian soldiers, operating under Nazi command, are deployed to maintain order and seek out Soviet partisans. The main character is the corporal of one of the units, István Semetka. When his unit falls under the enemy fire, Semetka, as

the ranking officer, reluctantly takes command of the group. However, his rational decision quickly leads to chaos and tragic consequences. Though it's the feature debut of Hungarian filmmaker Dénes Nagy's, the film won him a Silver Bear for Best Director at the 2021 Berlinale, where it premiered.

*Planeta Kino (34B Stepana Bandery St.) June 2. 7 p.m. Hr 150-230. Oscar (1A Sportyvna Square). June 6. 7 p.m. Hr 150*

## 'Morgana'

This sentimental Australian documentary follows the journey of a housewife turned feminist who finds happiness in one of the most unexpected activities — directing amateur porn. The documentary is filmed as Morgana Muses' reflection on her journey — from her childhood to her sexless marriage to her final break with conformity and beginning of sexual self-exploration as a pornographic filmmaker. "It wasn't porn... It was art," Morgana says in the trailer. The directors, Josie Hess and Isabel Peppard, complement Muses' story by adding interviews with experts and porn industry professionals, resulting in a short up-close documentary about self-love and sex positivity.

*Planeta Kino (34B Stepana Bandery St.) June 6. 9:15 p.m. Hr 150-230*

## 'The Metamorphosis of Birds'

This film is a profoundly personal Portuguese documentary based on the director's (Catarina Vasconcelos)

family history, which tells the story of her grandparents — Henrique and Beatriz. Henrique is a naval officer who's often away at sea, leaving his wife to raise their six children until her unexpected death one day. The movie is a recollection of memories — a way for the family members to cope with losing a loved one, each in their own way. Shot on 16-millimeter film and told entirely in voiceovers, the picture has a carefully composed vintage feel. Gentle and slow, the story unfolds through beautifully shot, at times surreal natural elements mixed with personal letters, photographs and stories. The 2020 documentary has won 11 awards, including the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Award for Best Feature in the new "Encounters" section at Berlinale.

*Zhovten (26 Kostiantynivska St.) May 30. 12:30 p.m. Hr 80. Kino 42 (11B Kostiantynivska St.) May 31. 9:05 p.m. Hr 120*

## 'Luzzu'

The debut feature of Maltese-American director Alex Camilleri, "Luzzu" profiles the little-represented struggle of a Maltese fisherman (played by an actual Maltese fisherman) trying to earn a living in a dying industry. The name of the film stands for the traditional colorfully painted fishing boats docked in Malta for well over a century. According to the plot, one such boat belongs to Jesmark, a native fisherman with a love for the sea and a desire to continue the longstanding



Courtesy

"Luzzu" is a U.S. drama set in Malta that follows a Maltese fisherman. It is featured in the "International Competition" block of the 50th Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival, which will run in the Ukrainian capital on May 29 - June 6. (Courtesy)

family fishing trade. But the odds are not in his favor. Mounting European Union restrictions, a son in need of medication and a series of unfortunate events push Jesmark to enter the black market. This "naturalistic and a bit on-the-nose in spots" drama, as The Hollywood Reporter puts it, captures how real-world misfortune and bureaucracy crush a fisherman's dream.

*Zhovten (26 Kostiantynivska St.) June 3. 10 a.m. June 4. 4 p.m. Hr 80*

## 'Residue'

Since its release in September amidst the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States, "Residue" made a splash, having been reviewed by the world's top media including The Guardian, The New York Times and The Rolling Stones. U.S. director Merawi Gerima's main character, Jay, is a filmmaker who returns to his childhood neighborhood in Washington, D.C., after working in California for many years, only to find it completely gentrified. Familiar black faces have moved out, and white folks have taken over their homes. Yet, despite growing tension with white neighbors and pressure from real estate agents, there are some who have managed to hold onto their place. Jay decides to shoot a film about the black community's struggle to keep its neighborhood but soon finds difficulty regaining touch with past familiarity. "A righteously angry meditation on people,

place and time, 'Residue' marks not just an arresting directing debut for Gerima, but a blunt statement on contemporary culture," says Los Angeles Times critic Kevin Crust. *Zhovten (26 Kostiantynivska St.) June 4. 1 p.m. June 5. 4 p.m. Hr 80*

## 'Valentina'

"Valentina" is another feature film directorial debut, this time from Brazilian filmmaker Cássio Pereira dos Santos. It follows the life of a 17-year-old Brazilian trans girl, Valentina, played by newcomer Thiessa Woinback who is trans herself. Growing up in a metropolitan Brazilian city Uberlândia, Valentina is free to express her identity in the anonymity of big city life and the support of friends and family. But when her single mother Marcia finds work in a small rural town, the teenager's happy world is shaken up by provincial attitudes and raised eyebrows. Warm and gentle, the film examines the marginalization of trans youth in Brazil at a time when ultra-conservative backlash is threatening the achievements of the LGBTQ activist community in the country. The film has picked up 12 accolades at numerous film festivals around the globe.

*Zhovten (26 Kostiantynivska St.) June 3. 6:30 p.m. June 4. 10 p.m. Hr 120*

Check full program at [www.molodist.com](http://www.molodist.com). Buy passes, tickets online at [www.ticketsbox.com](http://www.ticketsbox.com). Some individual tickets will also be available for purchase at respective theaters. 🍿

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# Molodist was Europe's second film festival to launch LGBTQ program

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by the Teddy Award of the Berlin International Film Festival, celebrating cinema about the LGBTQ community since 1987. He says he was amazed to see people of all ages as well as families with kids watching movies about LGBTQ people, which were highly stigmatized in Ukraine at that time. He thought his festival had to do something similar.

Molodist eventually became the second film festival in Europe to introduce a program of LGBTQ-themed movies. Years after Molodist started "Sunny Bunny," renowned events like the Venice Film Festival and Cannes Film Festival followed suit by launching similar awards.

Although Molodist was criticized by the highly conservative post-Soviet Ukrainian society for "promoting homosexuality," and was sometimes even attacked by far-right activists, the festival never gave up on its goal to make Ukraine more tolerant.

"We were breaking the traditions of the Soviet society," Khalpakhchi says.

According to Khalpakhchi, the films featured in the "Sunny Bunny" program are not simple romantic stories, but crucial pieces raising issues like the one of acceptance.



Legendary Italian actress Sophia Loren (L), Andriy Khalpakhchi, the head of Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival (R), speak with the media during the 33rd annual edition of the festival in October 2003. Loren is one of the many global film celebrities that attended Ukraine's oldest film festival, Molodist, which celebrates 50 years in 2021.

Award-winning Swedish drama "Something Must Break," which portrays a complicated relationship between a straight man and an androgynous person, was the "Sunny Bunny" winner in 2015. This year's "Sunny Bunny" competition offers a selection of 10 films from Israel, Germany, Brazil, Canada, the U.S. and more.

According to Hlib Rodchenkov, deputy director-general of Molodist, "Sunny Bunny" is now the most popular program among the festival's audience, proving the progress Ukrainians achieved over the years.

"Cinema is like a litmus test of what is happening in society. It always answers sharp questions or

asks sharp questions," Rodchenkov told the Kyiv Post.

Apart from "Sunny Bunny," Molodist gives a platform to other crucial social and personal issues through its other programs: The "Midnight Special" is all about sexual exploration, while "Teen Screen" addresses the challenges of adolescence.

"The festival is the engine of progressive thought in Ukraine," Rodchenkov says.

## Building community

Throughout the years, Molodist welcomed numerous beginner filmmakers who would later reach global acclaim. They include German Tom Tykwer and Fred Kelemen, British Stephen Daldry, French Francois Ozon and Bruno Dumont, the winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

"(Without Molodist) world cinema would have been a little bit poorer, and Ukrainian viewer would have definitely been poorer," Yaroslav Pidgora-Gviadovskiy, a Ukrainian film critic, told the Kyiv Post.

Molodist have also been building bridges between Ukrainian film enthusiasts and the global cinema community. From Italian actress Sophia Loren to French actor Gerard

Depardieu, many cinema celebrities have visited Kyiv at Molodist's invitation to present works, speak at discussions or simply make appearances.

This year, the festival will hold an exhibition honoring iconic Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini. His niece, Francesca Fabbri Fellini, is expected to attend the opening on June 4.

As the festival has passionately promoted the art of cinema, it has built a whole community of cinephiles.

Around 50,000 people visited Molodist last year, despite the pandemic. This year, the organizers expect an even bigger audience, having expanded the number of festival locations to be able to welcome all who want to join.

For many, Molodist has become a starting point to grow their appreciation for underground cinema. One of them is Kyiv lawyer Bogdan Kozar, 29, who has been visiting Molodist since 2013 and plans to volunteer at the event this year.

"Molodist is the only event in Ukraine that provides viewers with the opportunity to see such a large number of relevant and quality films," Kozar said.

"And it unites the local audience with the spectators of the festival from all over the world." ☺

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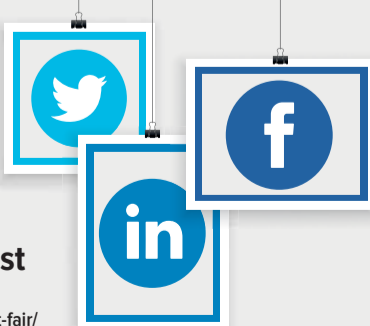


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The festival also honours the memorable role of the fallen hero's during the 2014 revolution by a symbolic 1000 tulips for each of the 'Heavenly Hundred'.

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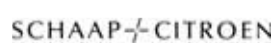
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