The Ukraine List #497

The Ukraine List (UKL) #497
compiled by Dominique Arel (darel@uottawa.ca)
Chair of Ukrainian Studies, U of Ottawa
www.chairukr.com
www.danyliwseminar.com
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#1
15th Annual Danyliw Research Seminar on Contemporary Ukraine

Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa, 7-9 November 2019
http://www.danyliwseminar.com

CALL FOR PAPER PROPOSALS

The Chair of Ukrainian Studies, with the support of the Wolodymyr George Danyliw Foundation, will be holding its 15th Annual Danyliw Research Seminar on Contemporary Ukraine at the University of Ottawa on 7-9 November 2019. Since 2005, the Danyliw Seminar has provided an annual platform for the presentation of some of the most influential academic research on Ukraine.

The Seminar invites proposals from scholars and doctoral students —in political science, anthropology, sociology, history, law, economics and related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities— on a broad variety of topics falling under thematic clusters, such as those suggested below:

Conflict
- war/violence (combatants, civilians in wartime, DNR/LNR, Maidan)
- security (conflict resolution, Minsk Accords, OSCE, NATO, Crimea)
- nationalism (Ukrainian, Russian, Soviet, historical, far right)

Reform
- economic change (energy, corruption, oligarchies, EU free trade, foreign aid)
- governance (rule of law, elections, regionalism, decentralization)
- media (TV/digital, social media, information warfare, fake news)

Identity
- history/memory (World War II, Holodomor, Soviet period, interwar, imperial)
- language, ethnicity, religion, nation (policies and practices)
- culture and politics (cinema, literature, music, performing arts, popular culture)

Society
- migration (IDPs, refugees, migrant workers, diasporas)
- social problems (reintegration of combatants, protests, welfare, gender, education)
- state/society (citizenship, civil society, collective action/protests, human rights)

The Seminar will also be featuring panels devoted to recent/new books touching on Ukraine, as well as the screening of new documentaries followed by a discussion with filmmakers. Information on past book panels and films can easily be accessed from the

top menu of the web site. The 2019 Seminar is welcoming book panel proposals, as well as documentary proposals.

Presentations at the Seminar will be based on research papers (6,000-8,000 words) and will be made available in written and video format on the Seminar website and on social media. The Seminar favors intensive discussion, with relatively short presentations (12 minutes), comments by the moderator and an extensive Q&A with Seminar participants and the larger public.

People interested in presenting at the 2019 Danyliw Seminar are invited to submit a 500 word paper proposal and a 150 word biographical statement, by email attachment, to Dominique Arel, Chair of Ukrainian Studies, at darel@uottawa.ca AND chairukr@gmail.com. Please also include your full coordinates (institutional affiliation, preferred postal address, email, phone, and Twitter account [if you have one]). If applicable, indicate your latest publication or, in the case of doctoral or post-doctoral applicants, the year when you entered a doctoral program, the title of your dissertation and year of (expected) completion. Note that a biographical statement is not a CV, but a written paragraph.

Books published between 2018 and 2020 (as long as near-final proofs are available prior to the Seminar) are eligible for consideration as a book panel proposal. The proposal must include a 500 word abstract of the book, as well as the 150 word bio and full coordinates.

Films produced between 2017 and 2019are eligible for consideration as a documentary proposal. The proposal must include a 500 word abstract of the film, as well as the 150 word bio, full coordinates, and a secure web link to the film.

In addition to scholars and doctoral students, policy analysts, practitioners from non-governmental and international organizations, journalists, and artists are also welcome to send a proposal.

The proposal deadline is 27 June 2019. The Chair will cover the travel and accommodation expenses of applicants whose proposal is accepted by the Seminar. The proposals will be reviewed by an international selection committee and applicants will be notified in the course of the summer.

The Danyliw Seminar website (http://danyliwseminar.com) contains the programs, papers, videos of presentations and photographs of the last five years (2014-2018). To access the abstracts, papers and videos of the 2018 presenters, click on “Participants” in the menu and then click on the individual names of participants. The 2018 Program can be accessed at https://www.danyliwseminar.com/program-2018. Presentations from previous years can be accessed under menu “Archives.”

Check the “Danyliw Seminar” Facebook page at http://bit.ly/2rssSHk.
For information on the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, go to https://www.chairukr.com. (The site is being re-developed).

The Seminar is made possible by the generous commitment of the Wolodymyr George Danyliw Foundation to the pursuit of excellence in the study of contemporary Ukraine.

#2
Kule Doctoral Scholarships on Ukraine
Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa

Application Deadline: 1 February 2020 (International & Canadian Students)
https://www.chairukr.com/kule-doctoral-scholarships

The Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa, the only research unit outside of Ukraine predominantly devoted to the study of contemporary Ukraine, is announcing a new competition of the Drs. Peter and Doris Kule Doctoral Scholarships on Contemporary Ukraine. The Scholarships will consist of an annual award of $25,000, with all tuition waived, for four years (with the possibility of adding a fifth year).

The Scholarships were made possible by a generous donation of $500,000 by the Kule family, matched by the University of Ottawa. Drs. Peter and Doris Kule, from Edmonton, have endowed several chairs and research centres in Canada, and their exceptional contributions to education, predominantly in Ukrainian Studies, has recently been celebrated in the book Champions of Philanthrophy: Peter and Doris Kule and their Endowments.

Students with a primary interest in contemporary Ukraine applying to, or enrolled in, a doctoral program at the University of Ottawa in political science, sociology and anthropology, or in fields related with the research interests of the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, can apply for a Scholarship. The competition is open to international and Canadian students.

The application for the Kule Scholarship must include a 1000 word research proposal, two letters of recommendation (sent separately by the referees), and a CV and be mailed to Dominique Arel, School of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences Building, Room, 7067, University of Ottawa, 120 University St., Ottawa ON K1N 6N5, Canada.
Applications will be considered only after the applicant has completed an application to the relevant doctoral program at the University of Ottawa. Consideration of applications will begin on **1 February 2020** and will continue until the award is announced.
The University of Ottawa is a bilingual university and applicants must have a certain oral and reading command of French. Specific requirements vary across departments.

Students interested in applying for the Scholarships beginning in the academic year 2020-2021 are invited to contact Dominique Arel (darel@uottawa.ca), Chairholder, Chair of Ukrainian Studies, and visit our web site www.chairukr.com.

#3
Rethinking Ukrainian Studies: Locally, Regionally, Transnationally

Conference, European University Viadrina (Germany)
16-17 May 2019

The Chair of Entangled Histories of Ukraine, held by Andrii Portnov, held its first large international Ukrainian studies conference on 16-17 May 2019 in Frankfurst/Oder. Portnov's professorship is the only research chair in Germany specifically referring to the history of Ukraine in its official title.

The program of the conference ("Rethinking Ukrainian Studies: Locally, Regionally, Transnationally") can be accessed at https://bit.ly/2MpDx0U

Videos of the presentations by Serhii Yekelchyk (Keynote Address) and Oleksandr Osipian are online at https://bit.ly/2IdQSUJ and https://bit.ly/2WCChLH

The YouTube Channel of the conference will be developed further, with more videos of presentations added.

For information about new fellowship opportunities in Berlin related to Prisma Ukraine Project, go to https://bit.ly/2Z6YcZ9

#4
New Book:

Olga Baysha
Miscommunicating Social Change
Lessons from Russia and Ukraine
Lexington Books, 2018
https://bit.ly/2W3A8o5

Miscommunicating Social Change analyzes the discourses of three social movements and the alternative media associated with them, revealing that the Enlightenment narrative, though widely critiqued in academia, remains the dominant way of conceptualizing social change in the name of democratization in the post-Soviet terrain. The main argument of this book is that the "progressive" imaginary, which envisages progress in the unidirectional terms of catching up with the "more advanced" Western condition, is inherently anti-democratic and deeply antagonistic. Instead of fostering an inclusive democratic process in which all strata of populations holding different views are involved, it draws solid dividing frontiers between "progressive" and "retrograde" forces, deepening existing antagonisms and provoking new ones; it also naturalizes the hierarchies of

the global neocolonial/neoliberal power of the West. Using case studies of the "White Ribbons" social movement for fair elections in Russia (2012), the Ukrainian Euromaidan (2013–2014), and anti-corruption protests in Russia organized by Alexei Navalny (2017) and drawing on the theories of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Nico Carpentier, this book shows how "progressive" articulations by the social movements under consideration ended up undermining the basis of the democratic public sphere through the closure of democratic space.

#5
New Book:

Coalitional Presidentialism in Comparative Perspective
Minority Presidents in Multiparty Systems
Paul Chaisty, Nic Cheeseman, and Timothy J. Power
https://bit.ly/2HF99v2

[Includes a lot of original work on Ukraine –UKL]

This book provides the first cross-regional study of an increasingly important form of politics: coalitional presidentialism. Drawing on original research of minority presidents in the democratising and hybrid regimes of Armenia, Benin, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Kenya, Malawi, Russia, and Ukraine, it seeks to understand how presidents who lack single party legislative majorities build and manage cross-party support in legislative assemblies. It develops a framework for analysing this phenomenon, and blends data from MP surveys, detailed case studies, and wider legislative and political contexts, to analyse systematically the tools that presidents deploy to manage their coalitions.

The authors focus on five key legislative, cabinet, partisan, budget, and informal (exchange of favours) tools that are utilised by minority presidents. They contend that these constitute the 'toolbox' for coalition management, and argue that minority presidents will act with imperfect or incomplete information to deploy tools that provide the highest return of political support with the lowest expenditure of political capital. In developing this analysis, the book assembles a set of concepts, definitions, indicators, analytical frameworks, and propositions that establish the main parameters of coalitional presidentialism. In this way, *Coalitional Presidentialism in Comparative Perspective* provides crucial insights into this mode of governance.

Oxford Studies in Democratization is a series for scholars and students of comparative politics and related disciplines. Volumes concentrate on the comparative study of the democratization process that accompanied the decline and termination of the cold war. The geographical focus of the series is primarily Latin America, the Caribbean, Southern and Eastern Europe, and relevant experiences in Africa and Asia. The series editor is Laurence Whitehead, Senior Research Fellow, Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

#6
New Book:

Natalie Kononenko
Ukrainian Epic and Historical Song:
Folklore in Context
University of Toronto Press, 2019
https://bit.ly/2Z3gGcY

Ukrainian epic, or *dumy,* were first recorded from blind mendicant minstrels in the nineteenth century. Yet they reflect events dating back to as early as the 1300's. *Ukrainian Epic and Historical Song* provides new translations in contemporary English. It also explains the historical events celebrated in epic and other historical songs: fierce battles, rebellion against tyranny, the struggles of captivity, the joys of escape from slavery. Natalie Kononenko's expert translation and analysis of Ukrainian epics provides a sweeping social history of folklore that is vital to Ukrainian identity. A translation of at least one variant of every known epic is included. Whereas earlier trends in folklore scholarship emphasized genre purity and compartmentalization, Kononenko critically examines the events about which songs were sung. Her emphasis on the lives of ordinary people rather than on leaders reshapes our understanding of how epics were composed and performed. Kononenko's ground-breaking analysis also illuminates Ukrainian self-understanding and explains how songs preserve and perpetuate historical memory. Scholars interested in epic song, history, and general folklore will benefit from this work. Members of the Ukrainian diaspora will find new appreciation of Ukrainian folklore.

#7
Yuri Vynnychuk

Tango of Death
Translated from the Ukrainian by
Michael M. Naydan and Olha Titarenko
Brooklyn, NY: Spuyten Duyvil
https://bit.ly/2WjWkiH

[Vynnychuk's novel, *Tango smerti*, was originally published in Ukrainian in 2012 (Kharkiv: Folio).]

"Yuri Vynnychuk's novel Tango of Death is a literary masterpiece about the magic of pre-war Lviv." Dariusz Nowacki in Gazeta Wyborcza (Poland)

"In his novel a stormy plot is interwoven with historical enlightenment, sarcastic humor and deep tragedy. ...[T]his spectacular artistic work is undoubtedly worthy of the highest recognition." Von Ulrich M. Schmid in Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Switzerland)

"Experienced readers know that books that capture your imagination from the very first page are rare. Even the most legendary authors succeed in doing this in only a handful of instances. Yuri Vynnychuk with his novel undoubtedly belongs to this elite circle. ... [T]his masterpiece reads like a grand parable." Joachim Mols from www.bestreaders.de (Germany)

"Yuri Vynnychuk is one of the most popular writers of Ukraine. His works are hotly debated and awarded many prizes. It's great that the cult author of Lviv can now cast a spell over German-speaking readers as well." Yuri Andrukhovych (Ukraine)

"...a demanding, exciting and entertaining to read novel despite a tragic story told over lengthy spans of time." Volker Breidecker in Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany)

"...a cleverly composed novel in which Vynnychuk skillfully alternates time and perspectives and tells a moving story about friendship and courage in the face of the utmost brutality." Karoline Thaler in ORF Kultur (Austria)

"...a rich, explosive novel." Jutta Lindekugel in titel-kulturmagazin.net (Germany)

#8
Joint Statement by Civil Society Representatives on the First Political Steps of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky

Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 23 May 2019
https://bit.ly/2Z0Xix2

Over the past five years, we, the undersigned, members of civil society organizations, have been actively defending Ukraine's sovereignty and national interests in global information space and counteracting the Russian information war. Each of our organizations works in a specific field to strengthen civil society and help build high-quality state institutions open to ongoing communication and dialog with our citizens, responsible for reforming our country and rendering it more stable and secure in the face of strong threats and challenges.

Our principles and positions remain unchanged. Our mission is to protect the values that Ukrainians fought for during the Revolution of Dignity – freedom and dignity, the independence of Ukraine and protection of Ukrainian statehood, a democratic system of

government, patriotism, courage, responsibility and honesty as the fundamental qualities of all Ukrainian citizens.

We remain politically neutral, but are deeply concerned about the first executive decisions taken by the newly-elected President. Unfortunately, they demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of the threats and challenges facing our country. We strongly disagree with the President's intention to appoint members of former President Viktor Yanukovych's regime to key government positions, a move that contradicts the principles of lustration, as well as persons without relevant competencies and individuals sharing business interests with President Volodymyr Zelenskyi. Given the pain and troubles that our country has suffered in the past few years, such short-sighted measures are bound to have adverse effects on society... and the consequences could be devastating.

As civil society activists, we present a list of "red lines not to be crossed". Should the President cross these red lines, such actions will inevitably lead to political instability in our country and the deterioration of international relations:

Security Issues:

- holding a referendum on the negotiations format to be used with the Russian Federation and on the principles for a peaceful settlement
- conducting separate negotiations – without the participation of Ukraine's Western partners – with the Russian Federation, members of the occupation authorities and their armed groups and gangs in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, Crimea and Sevastopol
- fulfilling the ultimatum requirements demanded by the aggressor state or achieving compromise with the Kremlin at the cost of making concessions to the detriment of national interests, national sovereignty, territorial integrity and order, and independent domestic and foreign policies of Ukraine
- inhibiting the implementation of security and defense policies outlined in the Strategic Defense Bulletin of Ukraine

Foreign Policy Issues:

- delaying, sabotaging, or rejecting the strategic course for EU and NATO membership; reducing political dialogue and destroying bilateral institutional mechanisms for cooperation with European and Euro-Atlantic partners
- initiating any actions that might contribute to the reduction or lifting of sanctions against the aggressor state by Ukraine's international partners

- attempting to review any actions aimed at supporting international solidarity for Ukraine, restoring our territorial integrity, guaranteeing security and protecting the rights of all persons that have suffered from Russian aggression

Economic Issues:

- extending preferential treatment to oligarchs: in particular, facilitating the return of nationalized Pryvatbank to its former owners or ensuring "compensations" to the same owners, as well as accommodating monopoly positions of financial and industrial groups in the energy sector

- implementing policies against existing agreements with the IMF and other foreign partners that help promote Ukraine's macroeconomic stability

- initiating major redistribution of wealth in the interests of specific groups

- exerting pressure on regulators (Anti-Monopoly Committee of Ukraine, National Commission for State Regulation in Energy and Utilities, National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council) and using them in the interests of political parties or groups, as opposed to supporting reforms in order to strengthen and increase their independence)

National Identity: Language, Education, Culture

- attempting to review the language law

- attempting to review the law on education

- attempting to review the law on de-communization and condemnation of totalitarian crimes of the past

- implementing any actions aimed at undermining or discrediting the Orthodox Church of Ukraine or supporting the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine

Media and Information Policy

- using the media (in particular, TV channel 1 + 1 and oligarch-controlled TV channels) to promote the new government

- restoring Russian social networks and Russian TV channels in Ukraine

Government Functioning

- eliminating electronic declarations for public servants and the Prozorro public procurement system

- launching politically motivated persecution of members of the previous government

- rehabilitating/encouraging the return to politics of members of former President Viktor Yanukovych's regime and individuals that supported the "dictatorial laws" of January 16, 2014

- enabling the Servant of the People Party to form a coalition with politicians that were founding members of the Party of Regions and the Opposition Bloc in the new parliament and/or any other parties that promote reconciliation with Russia by way of surrender or concessions of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity ignoring dialogue with civil society

- inhibiting key reforms: administrative, territorial, medical, educational, banking. delaying or sabotaging anti-corruption and judicial reforms

Through constructive dialogue and prompt criticism of the government, we have always sought to strengthen Ukraine's voice in the world and worked hard to gain the support of our international partners.

If the President crosses these red lines, it will indicate that he does not seek real democratic change and does not wish to establish a more honest and responsible government, even though he promised to do so during the election period.

[Among the signatories –UKL]"
Ukraine Crisis Media Center
Euromaidan Press
StopFake
Union of Writers of Ukraine
Myroslav Marynovich, a former political prisoner, a member of the Nestor group
Ukrainian Catholic University

[The full list appears at https://bit.ly/2Z0Xix2]

#9

Zelenskiy's Top Priority – Stop Predatory Law Enforcement

by Anders Aslund
Kyiv Post, 24 May 2019

Anders Åslund is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and author of the new book "Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy." Follow him on Twitter @ anders_aslund

After Volodymyr Zelenskiy's landslide victory, Ukraine is in a regime change situation, whether we call it so or not. The previous administration carried out great economic reforms, but the country's law enforcement and judicial system remain predatory. What Ukraine needs most of all is rule of law.

Zelenskiy has a tremendous popular mandate, 73 percent of the vote, but this is an anti-mandate against the old dysfunctional system, which has rendered Ukraine the poorest country in Europe. Ukrainians want Zelenskiy to break up this system and build something better.

If Zelenskiy follows the old rules, he will fail, but how much leeway should he be allowed? He needs to utilize his current momentum to cross the chasm of misery to move to a more functional system. Poland's great reformer Leszek Balcerowicz called this a period of "extraordinary politics," when people accept temporary suffering for future gains.

A natural place to start is with the constitution, but this constitution is of poor quality. Ukraine adopted its first post-Soviet constitution in 1996. It left much undetermined and concentrated too much power in the president. As part of the settlement of the Orange Revolution, presidential chief of staff Viktor Medvedchuk quickly rewrote the constitution, reducing presidential powers, but also making the constitution fatally contradictory. For example, the president appoints governors, but they are supposed to obey the prime minister. Some, including former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, voted against this constitution because of its contradictions.

Absurdly, in the fall of 2010 the Ukrainian Constitutional Court that is supposed to interpret the constitution abolished the December 2004 constitution at the behest of then-President Viktor Yanukovych, restoring the more presidential 1996 constitution. Several of those discredited judges remain on that court today.

The Constitutional Court recently embarrassed itself by claiming that the law on illicit enrichment, which is the basis for anti-corruption work, contradicts the rule of law. Zelenskiy rightly demands that the Rada restore this vital law as soon as possible. Neither the constitution, nor the constitutional court, are credible guides on the road to the rule of law.

When you try to break a bad old system, you need to bring in outsiders, who have a fair amount of knowledge but are not part of it, as John Williamson argued in his excellent volume The Political Economy of Policy Reform. That is exactly what Zelenskiy is doing. Most of his appointees are political amateurs. Estonia in 1992 was the most successful post-Soviet reform government under Prime Minister Mart Laar because it followed this model. Laar was 32 and he had three ministers who were younger than 30. His slogan was: "To wait is to fail." He argues that it is better to act fast and make mistakes than to wait and be abhorred or compromise with the old elite.

Yet, a new leader needs to coopt some of the old insiders, because they know how the system works and how it can be broken. If a new leader sacks all of them, he might antagonize the whole establishment and unite them against him, as happens in the "Servant of the People," where the Rada impeaches the fictional president. The difficult political art is assessing which old-timers to compromise with, and one can only judge in hindsight.

Zelenskiy appears to opt for foreign policy professionals of high repute, but he seems to be making his own choices. Diplomacy is not the rotten part of the system that needs to be replaced. The same can be said of the National Bank of Ukraine and the Ministry of Finance that maintain the macroeconomic standards of the International Monetary Fund.

In the presidential administration, Zelenskiy has chosen one member of the old guard, Andriy Bohdan, as chief. For the rest, he has appointed old friends from his production company Kvartal 95. In principle, this makes sense. He clearly feels he needs one hard-core policy professional, such as Bohdan. It remains to be seen if he has made a good choice.

Replacement of the prosecutor general and the head of the Security Services should be top priorities, because businessmen see these institutions as the most predatory.
It is vital for a new regime to hold early parliamentary elections. Otherwise the old guard will block reforms through the parliament, especially in Ukraine, where the distribution of power between the president, parliament, and government is so confused. The big risk in an interregnum is that the new guard cannot rule while the old guard feels no inhibition on theft. Therefore, the period before parliamentary elections after a new president has been elected is extremely dangerous and usually costly.

Ukraine knows this story all too well. The utter failure of the 1991-94 period was caused by the absence of early Rada elections. After the Orange Revolution, politicians focused on the March 2006 Rada elections rather than reform. In 2014, no economic reforms occurred until a new government had been formed in December. Ukraine needs to learn from history and not waste another opportunity.

If Zelenskiy had failed to dissolve the parliament, he would have invited failure. Now he has sensibly agreed with all the parliamentary factions to hold early elections on July 21. We should applaud his decision rather than invoke Medvedchuk's constitution or a

corrupt court. Only after new parliamentary elections can a new government be formed and a new reform program be adopted. Now we can hope for that in September.

An absurd argument against Zelenskiy is that a number of dodgy émigrés have returned. In reality, the current prosecutor general who was appointed by the previous president failed to prosecute these people and the courts failed to sentence them. These are sins of omission by the old guard. Whatever Zelenskiy would have done to stop their entry would presumably have been illegal.

Zelenskiy should be guided by sound democratic principles rather than a flawed constitution and a dysfunctional constitutional court. We observers should wish the new president the best of luck while carefully checking his actions.

#10

Ukraine President-Elect Zelenskiy's Positions on Russia, Explained

Moscow Times, 22 April 2019
https://bit.ly/2HOsYA7

Volodymyr Zelenskiy will be inaugurated as Ukraine's new president in about a month with questions still swirling about his true policy positions toward neighboring Russia. A native Russian speaker with no political experience, Zelenskiy has been accused by critics of having adopted a soft stance toward Russian aggression — including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Moscow's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The politician has even been accused of accepting financing from the Kremlin and of being the preferred choice of Russian President Vladimir Putin — who had a rocky relationship with outgoing Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

We looked back at Zelenskiy's interviews and public statements to see what the incoming Ukrainian president's positions on Russia really are.

Zelenskiy's positions on Russia before his presidential run:

— Shortly after Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, Zelenskiy said he was open to touring the Black Sea peninsula with his comedy troupe, but ruled out vacationing there "as long as there are armed people."

— In March 2014, he said: "I really want to address Mr. Putin. Dear Vladimir Vladimirovich! Do not allow even the hint of a military conflict to happen. Because Russia and Ukraine really are brotherly nations... If you want, I can beg you on my knees. But please, do not put our people on their knees."

— In August 2014, the politician sparked a Russian investigation after he performed for Ukrainian troops on the frontline in eastern Ukraine and donated 1 million hryvnia ($37,200) to their cause.

— While touring the frontline, he was accused by Russian media of making inflammatory statements. He said that his Russian colleagues were brainwashed and thanked Ukrainian soldiers for "defending us from all kinds of scum."

Campaign promises regarding Russia and foreign policy:

— Zelenskiy promised to bring home the 24 Ukrainian sailors who are under arrest in Russia after being captured in a naval incident near Crimea earlier this year. The candidate said that freeing the sailors would be his "number one task."

— The president-elect has stated that talks are unavoidable between Ukraine and Russia" because there's a "real war" between the countries. He also said that "there can't be any compromise on Ukraine's sovereignty and independence. We don't sell our people and we don't sell our territories."

— He has stated his support for finding alternative sources for oil imports other than Russia after Moscow banned exports to Ukraine last week.

– Zelenskiy promised to hold a referendum on Ukraine's accession to the European Union and NATO.

Positions on Crimea and Donbass:

— Zelenskiy said that he had a plan for a "powerful information war" to achieve a ceasefire in the Donbass. The plan includes launching pro-Ukrainian, Russian-language broadcasts in the region and worldwide.

— Zelenskiy ruled out granting special status to the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, whose Kiev-controlled parts went heavily in Zelenskiy's favor during Sunday's runoffs. He said there's "no point" in negotiating directly with the Moscow-backed rebels and endorsed deploying UN peacekeepers in the region.

— He has said that Crimea's return to Ukrainian control would only be possible under new leadership in Russia. "The so-called 'referendum' cannot be considered as an act corresponding to the free will of Crimean residents."

Does Zelenskiy have financial interests in Russia?

— Claims appeared on a Ukrainian hacking group's website before the election runoffs earlier this month alleging that Zelenskiy's campaign had received financing on behalf

of longtime Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov and Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeev. Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) said last week that it was verifying the information as part of a criminal case.

— Faced with accusations that he visited Russia at the onset of the war in eastern Ukraine in April 2014, Zelenskiy admitted that he had been working on a Russian film project that wrapped up in early June of that year. Since then, he has repeatedly declined to travel to Russia for his film premieres and festivals.

— Zelenskiy's Kvartal 95 production company took a 30-percent hit after cutting off all ties and leaving the lucrative Russian market following the annexation of Crimea.

— The then-presidential candidate denied reports in January 2019 that he still owned three active Russian film and television production companies through an offshore scheme. Zelenskiy said he pulled out of his stake at one of the companies a week later.

#11

The Murder That Didn't Happen

by Igor Burdyga
OpenDemocracy, 30 May 2019
https://bit.ly/2YYcrzq

It felt like daytime under the lights outside Arkady Babchenko's apartment block. It was a late May evening in 2018, and television crews were trying to force their way into the apartment block on Kyiv's left bank, but the police had closed off the entrance. Medics carried out the body of the famous Russian journalist on a stretcher.

An unknown man had shot Babchenko, a war correspondent, as he entered his own apartment. Shortly after, the Ukrainian police reported that Babchenko had died en route to the hospital.

"They took me to the morgue, where they brought me into an orderly's room," Babchenko told the BBC a few days later. "There I came back to life, I took off my t-shirt and cleaned myself up. I turned on the TV and started watching the news about my 'murder'."

Indeed, there was a lot of news about the killing. Politicians close to Ukrainian law enforcement immediately accused the Russian authorities of the murder. Babchenko, known for his criticism of the Kremlin, had left Russia in 2017 after receiving threats against his life. At a UN Security Council meeting the following day, 30 May, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin also spoke about the murder's possible "Russian clients".

"Today, the Security Service of Ukraine has information that it was the Russian security services who ordered the murder of Arkady Babchenko," Vasyl Hrytsak, chief of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), said a few hours later at a press briefing.

Hrytsak ended the briefing with the words "Arkady, you're on", and, with a gesture of the hand, presented the "resurrected" journalist to his shocked colleagues.

The SBU claimed at the time that even though Babchenko's murder was staged, there had been a real plan to kill him. The man who was supposed to carry out the hit, a former monk called Oleksiy Tsymbalyuk, had risen to some prominence in military circles as a volunteer fighter in the war in eastern Ukraine. Tsymbalyuk had contacted the Ukrainian security services of his own accord three months earlier, and handed over the man who apparently ordered the killing. The latter, who had promised to pay Tsymbalyuk $40,000 for the hit (if successful), was arrested the day after the "murder".

The actions of the security services outraged both Ukrainian and Russian journalists, as well as world leaders who had believed in the "murder" and the "Russian connection". But the SBU and General Prosecutor's Office had a justification: this staged special operation was necessary in order to catch not only the man who ordered the hit, but also a list of the Kremlin's other potential victims.

This list quickly became one of the first mystifications in the investigation: different sources gave different numbers of names on it (sometimes 30, sometimes 47). These people were journalists, politicians, left-wing and right-wing activists. In short, the selection was a chaotic one. Some were called in for questioning by the SBU as witnesses. They were asked to sign what were, in effect, non-disclosure agreements, and the security services offered them bodyguards for protection. Others weren't even contacted.

The ensuing investigation was supposed to prove the role of the Russian security services in the attempt on Babchenko's life, as well as other subversive activity in Ukraine. But a year on after the "Babchenko case" began, there's neither transparency, nor serious evidence.

Deals

The first person to be arrested in the investigation was Borys Herman, a 50-year-old businessman based in Kyiv, the capital. In Herman's messages to Oleksiy Tsymbalyuk, which are part of the investigation materials, he discusses on several occasions surveillance on Babchenko, the timeline for the "order" and the necessary weapons.

Herman was the co-owner of a range of logistic and trade firms, as well as a Ukrainian-German firearm company, Schmeisser. Indeed, it was in connection to the latter that Herman already had a criminal background when he was arrested: the Ukrainian police suspected that Schmeisser company registration documents had been tampered with, and one of the shareholders had lost their shares as a result.

Herman had also been previously suspected of illegal firearms possession. Schmeisser allegedly repaired weapons for volunteer battalions fighting on the Ukrainian side in the Donbas. Oleksiy Tsymbalyuk, the prospective "killer", transported spare weapons parts and ammunition to Schmeisser from the front.

At the first court hearing, Herman called himself a patriot and a Ukrainian counterintelligence agent, who had also been involved in the "Babchenko operation". According to Herman, he received the order to kill Babchenko from Vyacheslav Pivovarnik, an old comrade and business partner who worked for a so-called "Putin Foundation", which had been set up to destabilise Ukraine, finance opposition political parties and street protests.

Herman claimed that he had contacted Tsymbalyuk because he knew that the former monk also collaborated with the security services - and would not go through with the murder. "But we didn't reveal our hand," Herman said in court. "We understood that there's a lot of moles from the Russian security services in the SBU."

The SBU denied the claim that they had a relationship with Herman. But still, Herman quickly struck a deal with the investigation. The court sessions were closed to the public on the pretext that the investigation should remain secret, as well as possible security risks for suspects.

At the end of the summer 2018, Herman admitted that he had prepared a terrorist act against Babchenko, as well as the illegal sale of weapons. The sentence was announced in a closed court hearing, and is still yet to be made public. Instead, it's only known that Herman received four and a half years in prison - less than the minimum term set out by Ukrainian law for these kind of serious offences.

Since the end of 2018, Herman has been serving his sentence in a prison colony near Kyiv. Almost immediately he appealed for early release on the basis of his health, and a local court has been examining this appeal for several months. These hearings are also being held in camera on the insistence of Herman's lawyer Yevhen Solodko, one of the most highly paid criminal lawyers in Kyiv.

Was Borys Herman really a Ukrainian counterintelligence agent? Did he order the hit on Arkady Babchenko with the security services' knowledge? Solodko, Herman's lawyer, says yes.

In correspondence with openDemocracy, Solodko even revealed the name of Herman's supposed "curator" from the Ukrainian security services - the man who potentially possesses Herman's agent file. This man, Dmytro Ponomarenko, is apparently a former director of yet another Ukrainian firearms producer. openDemocracy unsuccessfully tried to contact Ponomarenko via telephone to confirm this information.

A trip to Rostov

Messages between Borys Herman and his business partner Vyacheslav Pivovarnik, who spent more than a year living in Russia, became the investigation's main evidence of the "Russian connection" in the Babchenko case. Indeed, it was this correspondence that led the investigation to identify another suspect.

Taras Stelmanshenko, 40, was arrested in mid-June 2018. According to the investigation, Pivovarnik sent the passport details of Stelmashenko and two residents of Cherkasy, in central Ukraine, on to Herman in order to arrange their transport from the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don to Kyiv. The Ukrainian security services quickly announced that the group had been in Rostov for training on carrying out terrorist attacks in Ukraine. During the search of Stelmashenko's apartment, law enforcement found a pistol.

Speaking to openDemocracy, Stelmashenko called himself an "independent artist". In court, prosecutors talked about his possible connections with a local criminal group in Cherkasy ("Torpedo") - Kostyantyn Krivich, a member of this gang, was detained for an arson attack on a Hungarian cultural centre in the west Ukrainian town of Uzhhorod.

Stelmashenko spent more than six months in jail before unexpectedly being released, having admitting his guilt and receiving a suspended sentence for illegal firearm possession. In a comment to openDemocracy, the General Prosecutor's Office stated that they did not find evidence of Stelmashenko's involvement in the attempted murder of Babchenko.

In an interview with openDemocracy after release, Stelmashenko claimed that he only found out that Babchenko even existed after his arrest, and that he did undergo training in Rostov, but for work in a private security firm.

Special agent

Vyacheslav Pivovarnik presents a similar version of events. He arranged Stelmashenko's trip to Rostov, apparently on the request of an acquaintance who was, according to Pivovarnik, looking to organise a personal security detail.

The Ukrainian security services have been searching for Pivovarnik for a year now. They believe he is the principal client of the attempted murder, and that he acted under the auspices of the Russian security services. For a long time his identity remained a mystery, but in autumn 2018 – after Borys Herman struck a deal with the investigation – Pivovarnik posted a video on YouTube where he claimed that he was, in fact, a Ukrainian intelligence agent, and had been since 2010.

Back then, according to Pivovarnik, he was working at an institute in Kyiv – the Institute of Geopolitical and Economic Research, an "expert centre" run by ex-intelligence chief Oleksandr Skipalskyi. The latter is a former deputy director of the SBU and runs an

organisation for security service veterans. Indeed, according to Pivovarnik, it was Skipalskyi who recruited him, proposing that he "expose enemies of Ukrainian statehood".

In a comment to openDemocracy, Skipalsky said that he does not remember Pivovarnik. During the interview, he also recalled that a man named Sergey Deyev had also worked at the institute. The latter, who died five years ago, was a business partner of Pivovarnik's.

According to Pivovarnik, it was cooperation with the Ukrainian security services that led to success in his main area of business – contraband goods. Pivovarnik is registered as the co-founder and director of several logistics companies, but he calls this cover for illegal imports and exports. "We transported everything apart from weapons, alcohol and cigarettes. It's people who are higher up that are involved in that," he says to openDemocracy during a Skype interview.

Pivovarnik claims that he traveled to Russia to collect information on Russia's weapons industry – a task set by his curator at the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence's Main Intelligence Directorate, known by its acronym GUR.

"Russia and Ukraine have been competing in the military business for many years," he says, "and information on export contracts or companies that provide spare parts is always very valuable."

But Pivovarnik claims that his alleged curators from the Ministry of Defence quickly changed their plans, and suggested that he attempt to provoke the team of Vladislav Surkov, an aid to Vladimir Putin, into ordering a series of terrorist acts in Ukraine. A prominent "political technologist", Surkov is known for "curating" Russian activities in Donbas, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to Pivovarnik, he made contact with a deputy of Surkov's, Inal Ardzinba, and offered him the contract on Babchenko.

"We had to demonstrate to the Russians that there was an underground organisation in Ukraine which was capable of carrying this out," Pivovarnik claims, "then get evidence of the deal and expose the fact that Russia was sponsoring terrorism to the whole world." He adds that this alleged mission was unsuccessful. After several meetings, Ardzinba apparently declined the proposal.

"When I reported this back to Kyiv, I was told that it was too late to back out. The process had already begun," Pivovarnik alleges. "But I didn't expect that they would make me into the principal client."

It's difficult to verify Pivovarnik's claims: the SBU calls them a lie, and Dmitry Poida, the man who allegedly organised the introduction between Ardzinba and Pivovarnik, denied knowing either of them in correspondence with openDemocracy.

Pivovarnik shared screenshots of chats with Andriy Kapustin, his alleged curator from the GUR. The messages, which openDemocracy has copies of, discuss details of contraband deals, and at the beginning of June 2018 – Borys Herman's testimony in court.

Pivovarnik's interlocutor suggests that the former return to Ukraine and take responsibility for the operation. In exchange, the interlocutor promises a "bonus and a good life". OpenDemocracy could not confirm the veracity of these messages: a man by the name of Andriy Kapustin did serve in the SBU until 2016, and then in the GUR until 2017. At a minimum, one of the telephone numbers used in the chats does belong to Andriy Kapustin, but he did not respond to the author's calls or messages.

A pariah

Pivovarnik himself claims that he left Russia in summer 2018: first he crossed the border into Ukraine illegally, and then travelled to Hungary. He refuses to return to Ukraine and appear before investigators: he is afraid for his life.

In December 2018, the SBU finished its investigation into Pivovarnik and transferred the case to court – he will be tried for committing a terrorist act in absentia. But after five months, the trial is yet to begin – the initial hearing has been postponed several times, and at the last hearing, on 20 May, one of the three presiding judges recused herself.

"No one wants to hear this case because it's a stitch-up," Valentyn Rybin, Pivovarnik's lawyer, claims. Rybin is known for defending Russian soldiers captured by Ukraine, as well as a series of suspects accused of state treason and spying for Russia.

Rybin claims that the charges against Pivovarnik are based solely on Borys Herman's testimony, which was given as part of a deal with the investigation. The Ukrainian security services, whose leadership was recently changed by Ukraine's new president Volodymyr Zelensky, still refuses to comment on the Babchenko case until verdicts are handed down to all suspects.

Arkady Babchenko himself does not know details of the case. The investigation does not officially consider him a victim – a status that would permit him access to investigation materials. But that does not prevent Babchenko from naming the man he believes is the principal client of the attempted hit on him – Evgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman close to Vladimir Putin, and who founded the now infamous Russian private security firm Wagner.

In Babchenko's opinion, the plan to kill him was Prigozhin's personal revenge for the journalist's investigation into Wagner's activities, as well as an attempt to destabilise the situation in Ukraine. Speaking to openDemocracy, Babchenko admits that he came to this conclusion on the basis of "logical conclusions from well-known facts".

In December 2018, Babchenko applied to the European Court of Human Rights, accusing the Russian authorities of harassment and attempting to kill him. That same month, Time magazine gave their annual nominationfor "Person of the Year" to a group of journalists from across the world – journalists who were killed, imprisoned or attacked for their professional work. The US magazine also named Arkady Babchenko in the nomination, noting that he had become a "pariah for certain colleagues" as a result of the staged murder.

Update: Inal Ardzinba commented to openDemocracy that he is not acquainted with Vyacheslav Pivovarnik. We were unable to refute or confirm his comment.

#12

Russian Donbas Militant Leader Girkin Admits to Using Civilians as Human Shields and Other War Crimes

by Halya Coynash
Human Rights in Ukraine, 29 May 2019

Igor Girkin (Strelkov), the Russian former military intelligence officer who led the seizure of Sloviansk in April 2014, has admitted to using civilians as human shields and exposing them to shelling in 2014. This is not the only war crime that Girkin acknowledges during this latest interview, in which he gives more details of how he personally decided on targets for extrajudicial killings. Following outrage from Ukrainian journalists, Girkin asserted that all their actions had been justified, and said he regretted only having not killed more Ukrainians.

The interview was given on 24 May and can, at present, still be found here (https://bit.ly/2HP2Ogy). Judging by Girkin's previous admissions to war crimes, the video may be removed, but copies of relevant parts can be found here (https://bit.ly/2MkaWKg) and here (https://bit.ly/2WdP7R4).

Girkin says that where they tried to fight away from built-up areas, they were defeated. *"Ukrainian military men said to me why are you sitting like cowards, go out into the field, don't hide behind civilians. Well sorry! Go out into the field to be killed? I'm not Don Quixote, after all!"*

It should be stressed that Girkin and his fighters were not just 'sitting' behind civilians, they were firing at, and very often killing, Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers.
Girkin was also asked about "rumours" of executions, which Girkin openly acknowledged. He says that four men were executed, including two leaders of units whose men had, allegedly, committed crimes. In one of the cases, the 'platoon leader' had not known of

the crimes, he said, but he was killed anyway, although the actual culprits, he claims, were sent to a punishment division.

Girkin asserts that initially these executions were by 'sentence' of what he calls a tribunal, made up of commanders of armed formations, however later they were without any 'trial'. There is no indication of whether any of the victims were given a chance to defend themselves, and it was Girkin who effectively decided who should be killed.
He says that "several Ukrainian spies and saboteurs" were killed, without any explanation as to how their decisions were reached.

He did not mention whether Horlivka Councillor Volodymyr Rybak; 19-year-old student Yuri Popravka; and 25-year-old student Yuri Dyakovsky, whose hideously mutilated bodies were found in a river, had been considered 'spies' or 'saboteurs'. All were abducted and murdered by the militants under his control just days after they seized Sloviansk.

There is little that can be called new in the interview. It was certainly known from the outset that the militants were using civilians as human shields. Indeed, in May 2014, two courageous women in Kramatorsk actually confronted militants telling them to get out of their street and stop putting their children in danger. They were forced to flee as punishment for their courage.

Russia was also well-aware of how the Russian and pro-Russian militants it was heavily arming and financing were using civilians. Such methods were, in fact, useful for Russian propaganda which made no mention of the fact that the militants were shelling Ukrainian positions from residential areas, shouting only if Ukrainian soldiers returned fire.

The first evidence of extrajudicial killings was reported by western journalists after Girkin and his men were forced to retreat from Sloviansk in early July. It was after that and some other defeats, that Russia stopped relying on formally retired spetsnaz officers like Girkin and mercenaries and began deploying its own soldiers with its first military losses believed to have been at the end of August.

At the beginning of August 2014, Igor Druz, a senior aide to Girkin confirmed to the BBC that militants had executed people in Sloviansk. He claimed that a number of people had been killed "to prevent chaos".

Girkin may have left Russia's military intelligence service [GRU] in 2013, but it is difficult to view this 'retirement' as unrelated to his subsequent actions. While Russia is still trying to claim that it is not a party to the war in Donbas, it was unable to keep denying its role in Crimea. Girkin is rightly under EU sanctions to this day over his role, as leader of the paramilitaries who helped Russian soldiers without insignia take control, in Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea. He arrived in Donbas on 12 April 2014, with around 50 heavily armed men, who had come from Crimea, via Russia. It is simply inconceivable that this was not supported, if not directly organized and controlled, by Moscow.

In March 2016, Girkin made another public admission to having ordered extrajudicial killings during an interview to the Russian publication Komsomolskaya Pravda. The interview was removed, presumably after enough commentators noted that Girkin had publicly confessed to war crimes.

In it, Girkin was asked how they had combated looting, and answered "through executions", using legislation on 'military courts' introduced by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in 1941. He admitted to four such executions in Sloviansk, with one person having been "an ideological supporter" of the Ukrainian nationalist 'Right Sector'. It is possible that Girkin mentions four in the knowledge that there is written evidence of four executions since in the 24 May interview, he certainly uses words that suggest a higher number of executions.

The Komsomolskaya Pravda URL now contains a quite different text, however the interview was very widely reported, and doubtless safely recorded as evidence for the International Criminal Court at the Hague.

The interview prompted a St. Petersburg lawyer, Arkady Chaplygin, to formally demand that Russia initiate criminal proceedings against Girkin for committing what were undoubtedly war crimes in eastern Ukraine.

It was a courageous move, but one that was clearly ignored by the Russian authorities. Girkin freely moves around Russia, confident in the knowledge that he will never be handed over to Ukraine or to the Court in the Hague. It is possible that his openness regarding war crimes and the war in Donbas is deliberate policy aimed at protecting his own skin. A very large number of the militants have died violent deaths not linked to the fighting, and the suspicion does arise that they have been removed because of all that they could divulge. While careful to follow Moscow's narrative on the Kremlin's most sensitive points ("all volunteers" and "the majority were Ukrainian"), Girkin appears to divulge everything and does it with total impunity.

#13
"A Surreal Country": The Mad Dash for Russian Citizenship in Separatist Luhansk

by Kristina Safronova
Meduza, 24 May 2019
https://bit.ly/2ESOJwX

Since April 24, residents of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics have been able to receive Russian citizenship through a simplified process. On May 1, this option was made available to all Ukrainian citizens with Russian residence permits. A center for issuing Russian passports to DNR and LNR residents has already opened in Russia's Rostov region. Since early May, people have flocked to these offices, hoping to lay

their hands on a Russian passport, even though the process laid out by Moscow requires them to submit their paperwork where they live. Meduza special correspondent Kristina Safonova travelled to Luhansk and the Rostov region to learn more about this dash for Russian citizenship and why people in Ukraine's Donbas want it so badly.

There's an executive order, but still no timetable

"Where do we go for the passports, to get citizenship?" asks an elderly man, stopping an official at the Interior Ministry's Migration Department in Novoshakhtinsk, a mining city in Russia's Rostov region.

"It's by your registration location, in your republic," he explains.

"But they told us that it's in Novoshakhtinsk!" the old man says, growing nervous. To look the official in the eyes, he has to tilt his head up slightly.

"In Novoshakhtinsk they opened a center [for issuing passports to LNR residents], but documents are received at the registration location. Someone there brings the documents here - they're collected back where you live."

"And if we're here? There was a supervisor here, and he told us to come."

"We don't receive documents. Look, go wait in the first office [for the supervisor]," the official says, tired of arguing, before hiding behind one of the doors.

This passport center for residents of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic opened on April 29 in Novaya Sokolovka, a village on the outskirts of Novoshakhtinsk. The facility occupies several rooms in a newly renovated community center that local journalists say needed repairs for the last 46 years. Behind the center, there's an unfinished house, and the fire department is just across the street in a building with a sign above the entrance that reads, "Prevention. Rescue. Assistance." Except time has nearly erased the letting, and all that remains is the word "Rescue."

The community center is surrounded by a fence, and nobody's allowed inside without permission. "It's a restricted area," explain two police officers, standing by their patrol car. They say the center is closed to the public, but people show up every day. (On the morning of May 8, when Meduza's correspondent visits the building, there's nobody waiting outside.) The officers say they offer advice to these people through the fence.

"Members of the public ask why [their documents] aren't accepted here, and they want to know the processing timetable," says Anatoly Ignatenko, a senior official at the Migration Department office in Novoshakhtinsk. "There's an executive order," he adds, "but still no timetable." Ignatenko says everyone who wants Russian citizenship should get it eventually, in theory at least, but they're supposed to submit their applications at the Interior Ministry's Migration Department, not at the center issuing their passports.

“We’re here as a transmitting site,” Anatoly Ignatenko continues. “[LNR] representatives and security officials bring us the documents, we receive them, and then pass them up the chain, to the Migration Department’s head office in Rostov.” Ignatenko doesn’t say how many citizenship applications have already been processed.

No visitors today

The office space for the Interior Ministry’s Migration Department in Novoshakhtinsk is a two-story brick building with faded paint at 9 Soviet Constitution Street, 10 kilometers (about 6 miles) from the community center in Novaya Sokolovka. Alexey and Eleonora (who asked Meduza not to release their surnames) say they’ve come here, not for the first time. They haven’t gotten anywhere by speaking to the staff, and now they’re waiting to talk to a supervisor. Alexey periodically walks up to each office, checks the posted business hours, and sometimes tries the door knobs. They’re all locked.

Alexey is 82 years old. Eleonora is a year older. They were both born in Novoshakhtinsk and went to college here together. After graduating, she got married and followed her husband (“he was a miner, they sent him off on assignment”), and left for the city of Makeevka in the Donetsk region, where she received Ukrainian citizenship, after the Soviet Union collapsed.

When her husband died, Eleonora was left on her own. Her only daughter had moved away to Zaporizhzhya, in southeastern Ukraine. “Every five years, the former students would meet on the Don,” Alexey says. “I kinda asked, ‘Where’s your husband?’ and she said, ‘He died.’ My [wife] had also died. And then I looked at her like, ‘Well, how ‘bout it?’” They started living together in 2006, moving between Novoshakhtinsk and Makiivka (east of Donetsk) every three months. But five years ago, when the war broke out in the Donbas, Eleonora relocated to Russia, and she only returns home for a few days at a time, every three months. This is when she started thinking about getting Russian citizenship.

“If we sign, the DNR will stop paying me the [monthly] pension for my [deceased] husband - 8,000 rubles [$125],” Eleonora says. “Last year, I received a DNR passport, but back then there was so much paperwork you needed to submit [to acquire Russian citizenship]. And now on television they’re painting this wonderful picture, saying 400 people from the Luhansk region have already brought their documents. But what for? If no one understands anything?”

“They said there’s no need to go anywhere. A DNR official comes and checks the documents. Just wait three months. But look at this mess. They’re not executing the president’s orders. There’s jack shit, and nobody knows anything. This country is surreal!” Alexey says angrily.

Nina is 72. Four years ago, she left Zimogorye in the Luhansk region and moved in with her sister in Novoshakhtinsk. “That’s right where they were bombing us, at the front line,” she says. “I got out of there because I was left completely alone. Everyone had died. On top of

that, I'm disabled, you see?" She holds out a swollen right forearm. It took Nina two and a half years to get a residence permit in Russia, and she expected to wait another five years for Russian citizenship, but President Putin's executive order means she might get it in just three months.

Like other Ukrainians with Russian residence permits (both temporary and long-term), Nina has to apply for Russian citizenship where she lives. In her case, that's Novoshakhtinsk. But Nina doesn't know this, and she has been unable to speak to anyone working in the Migration Department. Officials tell her that the office isn't receiving visitors today, even though the blue sign at the building's entrance says otherwise.

Visitors have been trying to get answers from each other for a while: "Where do we go? To Luhansk, Donetsk, or Novaya Sokolova? Which documents do we bring?" But most people leave more confused than when they arrived, only to return on Monday.

"Coming home"

Novoshakhtinsk isn't far from Russia's "border" with the LNR. The quickest route to Luhansk runs 124 kilometers (77 miles) through the "Dolzhansky" checkpoint, but locals often avoid the bad roads here and go around to the "Izvarino" checkpoint. From there, it's a straight shot to Luhansk along Highway M04.

Depending on the traffic, you might spend anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours at the checkpoint. Frequent travelers say there was once a time when you could pass without waiting in line, in exchange for a "donation to the LNR." When this option disappeared, people living in the towns closest to the border started selling places in line. Locals would also come into Russia to buy cheaper gasoline, but that practice largely ended when the cost of fuel in Russia and the LNR became roughly the same. To avoid getting stuck in long lines at the border, drivers now use VKontakte to track the congestion at checkpoints. Travelers post updates about how many cars are in line at any given time, so others can decide if they'd rather take a longer route to another checkpoint.

Two years ago, you could still see destroyed houses and artillery damage in fences along the road from Izvaryne to Luhansk. Today, evidence of this violence is gone almost entirely: the bus stops have been repainted, the pavement and homes in the area have been tidied up, and the only reminders of the war are an enormous billboard showing a humanitarian aid truck and the words "Thank you, Russia!" and a memorial complex atop a small hill, dedicated to the defenders of the Donbas.

On May 7, volunteers arrive at the memorial outside Sorokyne for a Saturday of clean-up work. Women in blue jackets sweep the area and prune the flower beds. 67-year-old Lyubov Tkachenko says the monument was built using public donations, and her family-owned sausage-clip manufacturing business, "Tonpak," has looked after the site for the past three years.

When the war began, Tkachenko says, supermarket shelves emptied of everything but napkins. Pharmacies also ran out of supplies, and even the cash registers suddenly failed. "I cried every time a humanitarian aid shipment arrived," she recalls. "It was only thanks to Russia that we started getting goods from Russia and Belarus." Tkachenko says people in the Donbas have nothing to begrudge for the past five years, and they're very grateful. She doesn't think of Russia as the aggressor, though she admits she was scared in 2014: "You walked around and there were soldiers everywhere. My daughter came under fire. I went out in gunfire for conifers and seedlings. They were shooting and we were planting trees. It made you laugh, and it reduced you to tears. But what could you do? We didn't stop work at the factory, and we survived."

Tkachenko says she was happy to learn that LNR residents will be able to become Russian citizens. "Of course, this step by Putin is especially heartening for us. We've been living in uncertainty for five years now." Because the Luhansk "republic" isn't officially recognized, Tkachenko had to send her daughter to live with her grandmother in Kharkiv, where she's studying at a Ukrainian school that will be able to provide her with a valid diploma. With their daughter "abroad," Tkachenko and her husband can't get an LNR international passport, though they need these documents to fly to China for work. She says she doesn't want to move to Ukraine because she's afraid of "falling in with someone who's dishonest."

Tkachenko's company now only works with Russian banks, and her products are shipped through Russia to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. She says her family is wealthy by local standards, but she doesn't reveal their income.

According to the LNR's Social Policy Ministry, the average monthly salaries in 2017 for local civil servants and healthcare workers reached 4,979 and 7,415 rubles ($77 and $114), respectively. Two years earlier, however, the prices of essential goods in the Donbas spiked an average 50-60 percent, according to Human Rights Watch.

Since 2015, retirement payments in the LNR and DNR have been steady. Pensions are set at the pre-war Ukrainian levels, but they're paid in rubles. Each month, Tkachenko receives 3,200 rubles ($49). Some people in the region manage to collect two pensions, which requires getting temporary registration on Ukrainian territory. "I don't blame them," Tkachenko says. "What's 2,000 rubles [$31]? And after the increase, it's 3,200? It's very little."

Ukrainian state officials say they plan to withhold social benefits from anyone living in the LNR or DNR who obtains Russian citizenship.

According to experts surveyed by the website The Bell, Russia will spend at least 100 billion rubles ($1.5 billion) in additional annual social-security payments to the millions of people living in the Donbas. President Putin says the cost will be significantly lower, arguing that 100 billion rubles will fund the expanded pension coverage for several years, not just one.

“For me, [getting Russian citizenship] means coming home. My parents were in Russia, and my sister stayed,” Tkachenko says. “We weren’t waiting to take part [in Ukraine’s presidential election], but of course we’re very worried. We’d really like to see relations get better. I have a daughter in Ukraine. I’ve got in-laws in Ukraine. We talk on the phone. There’s absolutely no animosity between us or between the people. The fact that the authorities can’t come to a resolution is a separate issue.”

“It’s the same life”

The Leninsky branch of the Luhansk militia isn’t the only station in the city, but at least 100 people line up outside on the afternoon of May 7. Some stand at the main entrance, beside a memorial plaque dedicated to Valery Lipnitsky (who fought with the separatists and died on January 20, 2015), but most of the crowd hides from the sun under the tall fir trees. Everyone here wants to apply for an LNR passport; locals can’t get Russian citizenship without one.

“We could have gotten passports earlier [the LNR started issuing passports in 2015], but we waited until the last minute,” explains 18-year-old Katya Bezkaravaynaya, saying that she can still hardly believe Russian citizenship is within her grasp. Bezkaravaynaya is training in modern dance and she dreams of leaving Luhansk for St. Petersburg, which she’s never seen. “I love my city, but there are no prospects here. I can’t become a dancer here,” she says. Her classmates also want to leave Luhansk: one plans to go to Ukraine, and the others to Russia. Getting Russian citizenship doesn’t require renouncing your Ukrainian citizenship, but Bezkaravaynaya says she doesn’t need it anymore. “I think Russia is better,” she says.

Before submitting their documents, people have to wait - in the longest and slowest-moving of all the lines - to be fingerprinted. “They said everyone today will [get through] in time,” Elena, 45, says. She was born and raised in Luhansk, but she moved to Nizhny Novgorod in 2015. “I had to save [my] child.” Elena already has Russian citizenship, but she’s in line for her elderly parents. “If they wanted to move, they would have done it a long time ago. They’ve lived here throughout the blockade, and all the shelling. But you can’t compare now to 2014. The republic is slowly recovering: the grocery stores are packed with food, they’re paying some kind of pensions again, and the prices generally are the same as in Russia. Everyone understands perfectly that people in Luhansk and across the Donbas are set on uniting with Russia. I think it’s the next step. At least people here hope so.”

Today isn’t 62-year-old Alexander’s first attempt to get an LNR passport. In 2015, he was told to keep using his Ukrainian documents, after the office ran out of forms. That’s when he says he first got the idea to become a Russian citizen. Before the war, his father-in-law left him a house in the Rostov region’s Tarasovsky district. When he saw the long lines at the passport center in Russia, however, he quickly abandoned the idea. “[At the Migration Department in Tarasovsky] there were three times more people than here,” he says. “I had to get up at five in the morning to catch the bus. Even here I arrived at six, and only half

the line has gone through. But I want to apply for Russian citizenship. We are brotherly people - we are one. It's no picnic in Russia, either. It's the same life, whether you're here or there."

"Surviving however they can"

There's a crowd just as big outside Luhansk's Migration Service office, but these people are waiting to apply for Russian citizenship. A young man loudly reads out the numbers of those who can now submit their paperwork, but most have given up and gone home, so only two or three people come forward, of the five numbers called.

65-year-old Lyudmila (Meduza is not revealing her real name, at her request) sits near the entrance in a folding chair. She's been here since five in the morning, but she first got in line yesterday, on May 6, when the office started accepting applications for Russian citizenship. Her number is 435.

Lyudmila's grandparents died in 2006, leaving her their apartment in the Krasnodar region. Since then, she's been trying to get a temporary residence permit in Russia: "Oddly enough, only the war helped. When it all started, everyone came to stay with me [in the Krasnodar region]. My daughter was living with her boyfriend. He went to fight in the militia, and later he got Russian citizenship. [According to Russian law, foreign citizens who have participated in armed conflicts are ineligible for Russian citizenship.] When he moved in with us, he and my daughter got married, and they finally granted me RVP. Before, they'd told me: 'Private property does not give you grounds for becoming a citizen of this country.' But this is my historical homeland. It's where my grandmother, my grandfather, and my mother were born and raised."

Suddenly there's shouting from all sides:

"Sir, where do you think you're going?"

"Hey, check yourself in at once!"

"What's your number?"

The ruckus breaks out because a man, either by mistake or sneakiness, decides to step a little closer to the entrance. The police officers on duty manage to restore order, and everyone falls silent again, their eyes fixed on the front door.

"It's just a madhouse," says Marina, who traveled more than 60 kilometers (almost 40 miles) north from Rovenky to submit her paperwork. In the two hours she and her husband have waited in line, the office has admitted just 20 people. But Marina's husband, Vasily, says it's even worse back in their hometown: only five applicants get through every hour.

Five years ago, their daughter left for St. Petersburg. She later managed to get Russian citizenship and found a job. Her parents also want to move to Russia. They say there's nothing to do in the LNR.

"There's work, but the salaries?" Marina complains. "I'm an accountant, and I get 5,000 [rubles per month - about $77]. Is that enough to pay for an apartment, food, and clothes? Our utilities alone are 2,000!" She says people "survive however they can" in the unrecognized republic. "The retirees collecting two pensions can still manage, and so can the miners. But here we are, unable to help our children or grandchildren."

Another commotion interrupts Marina's story, and the police narrowly avert a fight in the crowd.

"Are they open again tomorrow?" a middle-aged woman asks her husband.

"They said to stay until the end. Then they'll say about tomorrow. I hope to God they're open, so we can at least get inside."

#14

Ukraine: A Forgotten Conflict, A Forgotten People

by Mathias Eick, *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)*
European Commission, 14 Mat 2019
https://bit.ly/2XnJigJ

The European Union has focused its humanitarian funding in the areas near the front line and in the so-called non-government controlled areas where the needs of elderly people are particularly acute.

As the conflict in eastern Ukraine between the armed groups and the government enters its fifth year, 3.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. An estimated 30 percent of people (more than one million) affected by the conflict since 2014 are elderly, many of whom have been driven from their homes by the violence along the contact line that divides government-controlled areas and non-government-controlled areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Older women and older people with disabilities and chronic illnesses are particularly vulnerable. The European Union, as one of the largest humanitarian donors in Ukraine, has focused its humanitarian funding on projects in the areas near the front line and especially in the so-called non-government controlled areas where the needs are particularly acute.

The industrial town of Avdiivka with its coke and aluminum plant, belching pillars of smoke, is one of the larger urban areas situated right on the front line. Donetsk airport, where major battles took place, is only a few kilometres to the south. Despite the conflict, 16 000 people still live in Avdiivka, many of whom are pensioners.

Viktor Georgievich, 81, spends most of his days in bed in his cluttered room in a small apartment, the walls and doors cracked from shelling. Viktor came to Avdiivka in the 1960's to work in the factory and start a family. His wife and their older son died, and 30 years of hard working conditions caused problems with his spine and legs. Now, his few visitors include his younger son Alexandre, daughter-in-law Natasha, and their two children.

He receives regular visits from Yulia, a volunteer with the international NGO HelpAge, one of several humanitarian organisations that receive financial support from the EU to tend to the specialised needs of the elderly.

"Thanks to Yulia, I get to sit outside the apartment block and see the neighbours," Viktor told us. "But it is becoming more painful to walk and I need my stick and someone to help. Yulia also helps me with my physio exercises and other treatments I need. With her visits, and my family around I am never lonely. I love to play with my baby granddaughter and see her smile. At least the broken windows were recently replaced after lobbying the local authorities."

One particular area of concern is the payment of pensions to the elderly living in non-government controlled areas. While pitifully small, these pensions are usually the only source of income for hundreds of thousands of elderly in Ukraine. For the pensioners who reside in non-government controlled areas, the government imposed a condition for them to register as internally displaced people in order to receive Ukrainian pensions. While some of the pensioners have moved to government-controlled areas, others remained in non-government controlled areas.

Thousands of elderly are therefore forced to regularly cross the official crossing points in the searing summer heat or blistering winter cold to access their pensions and buy the basic essentials. This places tremendous strain on the fragile health of many elderly people. With EU support, the French NGO Premiere Urgence Internationale (PUI) set up first aid stations at major crossing points which can address sudden health problems the elderly may suffer during their arduous crossing.

Some also cross to look for relatives with whom they have lost contact, who they fear are perhaps imprisoned or even dead. Many elderly continue to remain in their homes along the front line because of an emotional attachment and often believe they are too old to move.

Antonina Mikhailovna, who lives in Myronivskyi and recently celebrated her 90th birthday is just one of thousands of elderly who fled their homes at the beginning of the conflict but returned soon after. "*I was very homesick there and decided to come back after a short time.*" She also refuses to move in with her grandchildren, and her children passed away long time ago. Her home was repaired with the help of People in Need, a Czech NGO and the UN Refugee Agency. But she can regularly hear the shelling. "*The fact is that every evening when we go to watch the news on TV, we think 'God, let us live to see the day*

when there will be no war'," Antonina adds. Many others like Antonina, who live in small villages near the front line, no longer have access to government-run health services. With EU funding, the NGO Medecin du Monde works with local medical staff to visit isolated communities regularly so that senior citizens can be examined and be supplied with vital medicines.

Back in Avdiivka, Nadezhda Fedorovna tries to sit up for her volunteer visitor. Now aged 85, she was partially paralysed in 2016 when her apartment was hit by artillery fire. Her son still lives with her, but he suffered a bad stroke two years ago, and is not able to look after her. "I have no more hopes and dreams for myself, but I wish strongly for peace and health for our community and our country," she says.

Viktor, who worries about his daughter-in-law and his grandkids, echoes Nadezhda's words, "The kindergarten closed so Natasha lost her job there and my son only works shifts so is struggling to pay for food and rent. This country has suffered so much and now we need peace. I want my granddaughter to grow up healthy and happy."

#15
The Killer Queues of Ukraine

by Olga Malchevska
BBC World Service, 28 May 2019
https://bbc.in/2wumIXO

Ukraine's simmering war with Russian-backed fighters has an inevitable civilian cost - people are caught in crossfire or step on mines. But a surprising number die in a more unexpected way - collapsing in the queues at the front line.

Many are standing in silence. Arguments break out as people try to push in. Some of those queuing are more than 80 years old.

They will be queuing for most of the day. Most don't eat or drink for fear they will need the toilet. Not because there aren't any toilets, but because they might lose their place in the queue.

This is one of the checkpoints at Ukraine's front line. About 30,000 civilians cross the contact line every day.

"Don't you see? People are dying here!" one of the women queuing says to me.

She doesn't mean this figuratively.

Eighteen civilians, mostly elderly, have collapsed and died crossing the front line since December, the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) reported in April. Most of the deaths were from heart-related complications.

Others in the queue fall ill or faint.

Some are crossing the front line to visit family.

But most are waiting to carry out a laborious, but necessary, errand - collecting their pension.

At the front line

I decide to travel to the front line to find out more.

There are five checkpoints on the Russian-backed eastern territories - four in Donetsk region and one in Luhansk region, and five corresponding checkpoints on the Ukrainian-controlled side.

The queue moves slowly as permits are checked on either side of the front line. Between the checkpoints is a walk of up to 3km (1.9 miles) across the contact line. It is mined on both sides and a curfew on shelling during daylight hours is not always observed.

But statistics suggest another big and unexpected risk - the sheer exhaustion of queuing. Most of those crossing are elderly.

At Stanytsia Luhanska, the checkpoint in Luhansk, paramedic Natalia Sylkina is struggling to cope.

“It’s been madness today,” she says. She explains that she and her colleagues are bringing people out of the queues who have already fainted, or are on the verge of doing so.

“There’s already been around 30 patients, with six or seven of them fainting.”

The previous day they treated 31 patients, she says.

“They’re all squeezed together. They can’t breathe... We’ve been raising or lowering their blood pressure here or resuscitating them.”

I discover that those who are 80 and over can actually go straight to the front of the queue, but most don’t know about this, or don’t believe it when I tell them - so fearful are they of losing their place.

I also travel to another crossing point - Mayorsk. Despite the curfew on shelling I hear the sound of gunfire and the army tells me to take cover.

One of those queueing there is Karolina, nine months pregnant, and crossing to see family on the other side.

“It’s difficult now. I’m scared that I might have to give birth on the way,” she says.

But, as at Stanytsia Luhanska, most of those queuing in Mayorsk are elderly.

This checkpoint has particular significance for Alevtina Kakhidze, who is travelling with me. It was the checkpoint her mother was heading for a few days after their last conversation.

That was four months ago.

Alevtina is a well-known Ukrainian artist. She lives in the north of the country; while her 70-year-old mother Liudmila lived in Zhdanivka, in the eastern region controlled by Russian-backed fighters.

It was very difficult for them to meet but they spoke most days on the phone. Alevtina drew pictures of her mother’s anecdotes - a way for her to envisage Liudmila’s daily life in a conflict zone.

She created a Facebook page for the pictures and they became popular amongst those in Ukraine hungry for news about the breakaway territories.

One day in January this year, Alevtina was expecting a call from her mother. Her phone rang, showing her mother’s number.

But when Alevtina answered the phone, it wasn’t Liudmila on the end of line. It was an unfamiliar voice. A man.

“A woman whose phone I’m calling from has died,” he said simply.

Alevtina was in shock. “I couldn’t speak,” she says. “I didn’t know what to think - whether it was even true.”

She asked the man to call her back later when she had been able to process the news.

Since he had introduced himself as a separatist fighter, calling from Mayorsk checkpoint, Alevtina feared the worst. She knew that her mother had been planning to travel to the front line that week.

On 16 January Liudmila had got up at 04:30 to start this gruelling process. These trips were made in inhuman conditions. It took her about 11 hours to reach Ukraine-controlled territory, she had told her daughter in the past.

The trip would be necessary, though, if she wanted to receive her pension. That could only be done on government-held territory.

So once through Mayorsk checkpoint on the Ukraine-controlled side, she would have headed to the town of Bakhmut.

Alevtina and I travelled there to see it for ourselves.

Bakhmut used to be an undeveloped backwater, but now it throngs with people who have crossed the front line from Ukraine's east, or who are waiting to return from the west. Dozens of businesses have sprung up - shops selling provisions and books for the journey across the front line; entrepreneurs running minibuses to ferry people right up to the checkpoint.

The queues that began at the checkpoints continue here at the banks and the ATMs.

There are many elderly people like Liudmila who have embarked on the same laborious journey for the same reason - to either collect their pension or to ensure the much needed money isn't taken away from them.

For Ukrainian nationals living in the territories controlled by Russian-backed fighters claiming your state pension is not a simple process.

Ukrainian banks don't operate on the breakaway territory.

And in order to qualify for them you need to pretend you actually live in a Ukrainian-controlled area.

And then you have to be ready for someone to knock on the door of that property every 60 days to check if you really do live there.

Except that knock might not come on Day 60 - it might come on Day 58 or 59. So, many rely on a local friend to ring ahead and warn them the authorities are in the area.
Then the dash to the front line begins.

Liudmila had originally planned to travel a couple of days later than she actually did, her daughter says. So Alevtina thinks she must have received such a phone call to warn her, and rushed to bring her travel plans forward.

Liudmila, like others living in the region, was also eligible for another pension - from the Russian-backed authorities, Alevtina says.

But at only $46 [£36] a month, it was nowhere near enough to live on, even when supplemented by the money she earned selling vegetables. So her Ukrainian pension, giving her an additional $65 [£50] a month, was essential.

The journey is so difficult and slow that not everyone can make it across and back in 24 hours.

Alevtina's mother could have stayed with friends. But some have to stay in a hostel overnight - an added expense, and from what I saw from the one I visited in Bakhmut, very basic conditions.

Alevtina says she could have given her mother the equivalent of her pension. But she knew Liudmila would be too proud to take it. She says her mother fiercely guarded her independence and felt it was her moral right to claim the money owed to her.

But it came at a fatal price.

Liudmila fell ill on a bus as she neared the final checkpoint manned by the Russian-backed militia.

"Somebody tried to help her; she was put into a shelter on the front line. They even called an ambulance, but it didn't manage to come in time."

No-one knows what she died from but her daughter believes the strain of the journey had taken its toll. It took two days for Liudmila's elderly neighbours to go and identify her.

Alevtina's high profile in the country made it too risky for her to cross over to the territories held by the Russian-backed fighters.

"I made dozens of calls to the emergency services, the authorities and the secret service," she tells me. "And finally, my mum arrived in our village... And we buried her."

A gruelling conflict

Human rights campaigners argue that the queues would be eased if the Ukrainian government worked harder to simplify the pension system for those living in the breakaway territories.

The government, for its part, says it tried to open an additional checkpoint to ease the queues but the Russian-backed forces wouldn't agree to it.

But the authorities are also accused by rights groups of making it deliberately difficult in order to deter claimants. About 62.2bn hryvnias [$2.4bn] worth of pensions went unclaimed between August 2014 and September 2018, according to the Ukrainian NGO Right to Protection, which shared an official letter from the Ukrainian Pension Fund with the BBC.

In an interview with the BBC, Ukraine's minister of social policy questioned whether those living in the areas controlled by Russian-backed fighters should be claiming state pensions in the first place.

"Everyone who's pro-Ukrainian has left, and those who want to claim pensions on both sides have to put up with [the conditions]," Andriy Reva said in the report broadcast last month.

He said some residents there had helped perpetuate the fighting by allowing the Russian-backed separatists to use them as human shields.

"Honestly I don't feel pity for them... not one of them. I feel pity for [the] soldiers and officers, and for their families, who were killed there."

Mr Reva's comments created waves across Ukrainian society, with some MPs even calling for his resignation.

Human rights activists argue that the civilians should be seen as hostages of war, not enablers of the conflict.

Mr Reva added that the priority was to end the fighting.

"The main option to prevent those people from suffering is to stop the war. And to stop it - the occupiers must get out of the territory of Ukraine and that's it. And people will stop suffering.

"There are Minsk [peace deal] agreements, the formula is clearly defined in those. But even the first point [of the agreement] - the ceasefire - the gangsters do not fulfil. Because Moscow does not set them such a task."

Ukraine's new president Volodymyr Zelensky has also said he wants to end the fighting.

"Our first task is to achieve a ceasefire in Donbas," he said during his inauguration address on 20 May.

He has stated that Ukraine must "give a hand" to those living in the occupied territories. But he did not provide any details.

As a political novice - Mr Zelensky is best known for starring in a satirical TV series in which his character accidentally becomes president - it is not yet clear how much will change under him. His campaign did not focus on any concrete policy proposals.

His landslide election was, however, a clear message to former incumbent Petro Poroshenko that Ukraine's electorate is frustrated, not just with corruption, but also with the war.

The conflict began in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea to the south, exploiting a political vacuum in Ukraine. Russian-backed fighters then seized Luhansk and Donetsk - the Donbas region - in the east.

Both Crimea and Donbas are strategic and symbolic gains for Russia. Annexing Crimea gives Russia better control of the Black Sea with its deposits of natural gas, and Donbas is home to most of Ukraine's coal mines.

Ukraine describes the conflict as a "Russian invasion". Western governments accuse Russia of helping the separatists in the region with regular troops and heavy weapons. Despite strong evidence to the contrary, Moscow denies that, while admitting that Russian "volunteers" are helping the separatists.

In April, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree making it easier for those living in Donbas and Crimea to get a Russian passport.

Mr Zelensky declared this a hostile act, calling on the international community to react with sanctions.

A ceasefire in eastern Ukraine was declared in 2015 but is regularly broken by both sides.

The fighting has killed around 13,000 people. Three thousand of them have been civilians, the UN said in February.

Healing through art

In Bakhmut, the town Liudmila was heading for on her ill-fated final journey, I say goodbye to Alevtina.

I want to see more, so I am shown around by a local student, Denis Rudenko.

His university is called Horlivka's Institute of Foreign Languages. But confusingly it is no longer based in Horlivka.

After that town - 40km (25 miles) away - fell to the Russian-backed fighters in 2014, part of the university decided to move into Ukraine-controlled territory.

Denis says he has also moved from his hometown of Horlivka to Bakhmut.

"When you don't see any future there... you see only one option: to run away somewhere where at least there is a chance for a future."

On one of the walls inside the university is a mural of a woman trying to cross the front line.

“It was made by a famous Ukrainian artist,” says Denis. “Alevtina Kakhidze. We are so lucky that she chose our town for her work. I helped a bit with that project - she brought so much inspiration.”

Denis now organises art events for local young people, which attract youngsters not only from Bakhmut, but sometimes from the territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists.

His aim is to give visitors a global perspective on the conflict - many of those coming to the events have never left their home town.

He hopes the projects will break down boundaries.

“Maybe it’s just little steps, but I feel they make a difference, make little changes.”

Remembering Liudmila

Alevtina continues to update the Facebook page she created for her pictures about her mother.

The page is full of line drawings of the day-to-day challenges Liudmila faced in Zhdanivka.

Many of them show her in her garden. She was a keen gardener, and sold her produce to supplement her pension.

But even gardening is fraught with risk in a war zone.

“I’ve been carrying tomatoes today through the veggie garden, a bucket in each hand, and thinking: ‘What if the shelling starts right now? Where will I hide with my tomatoes?’” she told Alevtina on the phone.

“I came home all sweaty. Not because my tomato buckets were heavy, but because I was scared.”

Alevtina says she regularly tried to persuade her mother to leave eastern Ukraine for safety, but she could never get her to agree.

“What did I do wrong that I must escape?” she would say to her daughter.

“Should all my life now go down the drain just because of that so called ‘new republic?’”

#16
Where Are They Now?

By Grigory Alexandrov
Meduza, 31 May 2019
https://bit.ly/2WEJBXa

Five years ago, the bloodiest European war of the 21st century began in eastern Ukraine. Here's what's become of those early separatist leaders.

Full-scale combat started in eastern Ukraine on May 26, 2014, with the battle for Donetsk airport. The Ukrainian army faced off against separatists from two self-declared "people's republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk, and by extension the Russian military, which offered its unofficial support. The "active stage" of fighting continued until February 2015, when the Minsk II agreement was signed. According to the UN, the conflict in eastern Ukraine has claimed at least 13,000 lives. Almost none of the figures who led the initial protests against the Ukrainian government or the subsequent fighting against Ukrainian troops remain in today's separatist leadership. In fact, many of these men have been killed. To learn what happened to the first leaders of the Donbas, *Meduza* spoke to people who knew them and to others who witnessed the dramatic events of 2014.

The living

Igor Ivanovich Strelkov, real name: Igor Vsevolodovich Girkin. "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) defense minister from May 16 to August 14, 2014. Call sign: "Strelok" (Shooter)

Before the war: Strelkov was born on December 17, 1970, in Moscow, and studied at the Institute of History and Archives. Strelkov is especially fond of military reenactment and the history of the White Guard movement that opposed the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. He's fought in armed conflicts in Transnistria, Bosnia, and the Caucasus. According to some accounts, he demonstrated particular cruelty in Chechnya. Strelkov served in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and retired with the rank of colonel. Afterwards, he managed security for the "Marshal Capital" foundation, which is owned by Konstantin Malofeev, a devout Russian Orthodox businessman who is suspected of financing the Donetsk and Luhansk separatist republics. (Malofeev denies these allegations.)

In 2014, Strelkov actively participated in Russia's annexation of Crimea, commanding a company of pro-Russian "militia" that stormed the Ukrainian Cartographic Center in Simferopol. Two people died in that confrontation: a Ukrainian soldier and one of the attackers.

During the war: While events were still unfolding in Crimea, Strelkov started recruiting individuals for a "business trip" to the Donbas. "Strelkov brought together a group of 52 people from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and Crimea itself," says Alexander Zhuchkovsky,

a volunteer from St. Petersburg who coordinated aid contributions to Strelkov's unit and wrote a book titled "85 Days of Slovyansk." "They crossed the border and headed for Slovyansk, where there was a group of locals who actively supported the uprising. [Strelkov] had experience leading small paramilitary forces and conducting operations and acts of sabotage on this scale. In the first months of the conflict, he ran circles around the others. Here was an FSB colonel with a good education, a grasp of history, a breadth of knowledge, and four wars under his belt. This allowed him to become the first 'militia' leader and defense minister [of the DNR]."

Strelkov didn't tolerate any debate at meetings, and he imposed severe punishments on subordinates for failing to obey his orders — even executing some of his own men. He cited a martial law decree by the Presidium of the USSR's Supreme Soviet from June 22, 1941, as the legal basis for these actions. The website *Life* published a photograph of Strelkov's orders to this effect. "The first executions were two 'militiamen' who robbed someone's apartment," Zhuchkovsky says in his book.

Many Donbas locals say they're convinced that Strelkov was sent by Moscow to oversee the "transition period." Zhuchkovsky argues that he was sent to the region without a grand plan: "Go ahead, and we'll see. If you create the conditions and if you see that the situation there is the same as in Crimea, we'll give our support, and a normal military group will follow." According to former DNR People's Council Chairman Andrey Purgin (who spoke out against the Ukrainian authorities long before 2014), Strelkov's group initially had a "local mission," and he never planned to become one of the region's main separatist leaders. Purgin says another two groups came to Donetsk with Strelkov. Many of these combatants were wounded during the first battle for the city's airport on May 26, 2014, but almost no one remembers them today.

On July 5, 2014, Strelkov's forces abandoned Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, and several other settlements, and retreated to Donetsk, where he declared himself the city's military commandant and imposed martial law. "Donetsk is an enormous city where Makhnovism flourished and the leadership was still half Ukrainian," Zhuchkovsky recalls. "Controlling the situation in those circumstances was virtually impossible. All the 'militia' commanders were ambitious men, each one considered himself a great general, and they could all draw on certain resources and people. For many of them, crowns started growing on their heads. The city's defense hung in the balance."

"Everything then was very complicated and confusing, and mixed up in distrust, fake stories, and provocations," former DNR Security Council head and "Vostok" brigade commander Alexander Khodakovsky told Meduza. "We continued to address tactical issues, but on a personal level. While Strelkov was in Donetsk, there was no communication between us. I didn't trust him, and he didn't trust me."

Zhuchkovsky says Strelkov didn't want Ukraine to exploit the disagreements among separatist field commanders, so he resigned as DNR defense minister on August 14, and left the Donbas. According to Zhuchkovsky, there was also an ultimatum from Russia

demanding that Strelkov leave the region, as a condition for Moscow's support. Russia supposedly feared the combination of Strelkov's "mega-popularity" and "evidently oppositionist views."

After the war: Strelkov heads the "Novorossiya" social movement, raising humanitarian aid and ammunition and uniform supplies for DNR soldiers. Zhuchkovsky says there's almost no chance that he'll ever return to the Donbas: "He's already established himself as a staunch opponent of the authorities. Today, he criticizes Russia's state leadership harshly and consistently, and goes after Putin personally. He's viewed as an enemy of the state."

"Strelkov is totally incapable of working with staff," says Evgeny Shabaev, a former official representative of the "Donetsk Republic" movement in Russia. "After he returned from the Donbas, a lot of con men latched onto him, trying to exploit Mr. Strelkov's glory. They sang his praises, and called him a genius and a hero — all while opening fundraisers in his name, supposedly to help the militia and the people of the DNR. And then they disappeared. Some other supporters and I advised Strelkov to do some long-term planning, but he wasn't interested. After all, at one point he seemed to be as famous as Putin. And in the end, he's all alone outside the Foreign Ministry building with a poster about the Kuril Islands [against transferring the islands to Japan]."

Alexey Sorokovoi, the chief of staff of the Novorossiya movement, told Meduza that Igor Strelkov refused to be interviewed for this story.

Alexander Borodai, DNR prime minister from May 16 to August 7, 2014

Before the war: Borodai was born in Moscow on July 25, 1972. His father was a philosopher named Yuri. In 1992, Alexander Borodai fought in the Transnistria War, and a year later he defended the Russian White House from supporters of Russian President Boris Yeltsin. He has a graduate degree from Moscow State University's Philosophy Department, where he studied ethnic conflicts. Borodai worked as a military correspondent, reporting for the newspaper Zavtra from Chechnya and other post-Soviet war zones, and as a political consultant and public relations expert for the entrepreneur Konstantin Malofeev.

Arriving in Donetsk in the spring of 2014, Borodai rallied thousands of people for demonstrations under the slogan "The Donbas is Russia!" In mid-May, the DNR's Supreme Council approved his appointment as prime minister of the self-proclaimed republic. This position would later be known simply as "head of the DNR." "In the beginning, the DNR was supposed to become a parliamentary republic, but the war forced a unity of command," says Andrey Purgin, who was the co-chairman of the coordination council for the DNR's independence referendum. (After the vote, the DNR's Supreme Council was created on the basis of this commission. Purgin would eventually lead this institution, as well.)

During the war: "Borodai came to Donetsk supposedly as a representative of the Russian presidential administration," Evgeny Shabaev told Meduza. "He effectively appointed himself DNR leader. Admittedly, his authority and interests were really only limited to Donetsk, and even then they didn't extend to all spheres. So for a long time, the city's leadership continued to take orders from Kyiv. Meanwhile, armed men acting in Borodai's name and shouting 'Glory to the DNR!' seized shopping centers, commandeered property, and so on." Shabaev says the separatists also confiscated several billion hryvnias from a handful of Ukrainian banks in the city (one hryvnia was worth about 2.5 rubles, at the time), and the money was carted off to an unknown location, supposedly after a phone call from someone in the Kremlin.

Roman Manekin, a Russian publicist who's lived in Donetsk since 2014, told Meduza that "few people have done as much harm to the Donbas" as Alexander Borodai, recalling his so-called "tax holiday" policy. "The republic will not levy taxes on business people," Prime Minister Borodai announced at a public briefing on July 17, 2014. "This policy will remain in effect until the end of hostilities in our territory."

According to Manekin, the real reason for this decision was the fact that former DNR Security Council head Alexander Khodakovsky had managed to secure key posts for two of his subordinates, Alexander "San Sanych" Semenov and Pyotr "Khorvat" Savchenko, in the DNR's economic leadership: deputy prime minister for economics and revenue and taxation minister. But both men were busy in combat, and they'd never even set foot in their offices. "In this situation, Borodai made a 'Soloman's decision' not to collect taxes at all," Manekin explains. "This move prompted field commanders to impose 'taxes' on businesses independently. As a result, there was not, and indeed could not have been, a single boss or leader who didn't have a hand in the extortion free-for-all in 2014."

On July 17, 2014, a passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down outside Donetsk, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew on board, leading to the first major international sanctions against Russia. On August 7, Borodai resigned from his post as head of the DNR government, and was made a general adviser and deputy to the next prime minister, Alexander Zakharchenko. Borodai claims that he chose his successor, after considering Alexander Khodakovsky as an alternative candidate.

After the war: When he finally returned to Moscow in the summer of 2015, Borodai founded the "Union of Donbas Volunteers" (SDD). On its official website, the organization says it has dozens of offices and representatives in different regions, republics, and territories across Russia.

"This is a real organization that includes more than 13,000 people who participated in the events in the DNR and LNR," Borodai told Meduza. "The SDD has many passionate people who are united by the idea of all-Russian patriotism and loyalty to current President Putin. We treat the wounded, bury the dead, and help families. We're providing direct assistance to soldiers with medicines that are needed on the battlefield."

Shabaev claims that SDD has helped send the most devoted and "inconvenient" Donbas fighters to Syria, and now Borodai is supposedly trying to recruit more mercenaries for private military companies that operate mainly in Africa.

Denis Pushilin, head of the DNR since November 20, 2018

Before the war: Pushilin was born on May 9, 1981, in Makiivka, an industrial city outside Donetsk. He served in Ukraine's Interior Ministry, and studied at the Donbas National Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture, but never graduated. Before the war, he led the Ukrainian division of the "MMM" Ponzi-scheme company, which he used to organize a political party and run for a seat in Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada. (He lost.)

"At the time when I brought him into our still underground movement, Pushilin had no ties to the Donetsk patriotic or pro-Russian agendas," recalls Purgin, who says Pushilin still called himself a "patriot of Ukraine" as late as April 2014.

Pushilin nevertheless rose fast, quickly becoming one of the protest movement's formal leaders. "Denis couldn't marshal any real military force or serious financial assets, and he couldn't influence events at the front, or elsewhere, for that matter," a source close to the DNR's leadership told Meduza. "But he could speak convincingly in press conferences at the regional administration building."

During the war: After the Donetsk People's Republic proclaimed its existence, Pushilin became the chairman of its Supreme Council (which was later renamed the People's Council and made into the local parliament). According to Roman Manekin, Borodai publicly accused Pushilin in the summer of 2014 of trying to loot the Makiivka Iron and Steel Works. "On June 9, Denis Pushilin went to Russia, and after some time he was removed in absentia from his position on the DNR Supreme Council at Borodai's request, who presented documents showing that Pushilin was directly tied to mass theft," confirms Andrey Purgin, adding, "It wasn't just the Makiivka Iron and Steel Works, but also aluminum grain cars and other things."

Roman Manekin believes these allegations are linked directly to the murders of two of Pushilin's aides, one of whom was shot in a car, and another who was blown up in a minibus in the center of Donetsk. DNR officials say they suspect both killings were attempts on Pushilin's life, though he wasn't present at either incident. In July 2014, Pushilin visited Moscow, where (according to Manekin and several other sources) he met with Kremlin officials, including Vladislav Surkov. That fall, he returned to Donetsk and was elected to the People's Council, DNR's new parliament.

After the war: Pushilin represented the DNR at ceasefire negotiations in Minsk. In the fall of 2015, he became chairman of the People's Council (once again heading the DNR's local parliament). "One night, they gathered all the deputies together at gunpoint, and then they 'elected' Pushilin their chairman," Manekin recalls. "I led the People's Council from November 2014 to September 2015," says Andrey Purgin. "Denis Pushilin replaced

me in this position with a one-off departure from all norms and laws. Simply put, it was a complete outrage. In civilized countries, they'd call this a coup. Afterwards, based on orders from the MGB [State Security Ministry], I was moved to a basement, and placed under guard. I didn't ask for these guards."

After a bomb killed Alexander Zakharchenko on August 31, 2018, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Trapeznikov became interim leader, in accordance with the DNR's constitution. A week later, however, Pushilin replaced him — despite the absence of any constitutional grounds for this transition. "Trapeznikov was taken by 'experts' in the middle of the night and brought to Russia," Manekin says, arguing that these events "prove clearly that this coup was carefully planned."

Manekin believes the decision to choose Pushilin was made at a much higher level than the DNR's own leadership, and he attributes the appointment to officials who dismissed Pushilin's considerable unpopularity in Donetsk. Other candidates for the job were either barred entry to the region, blown up, or kidnapped. "Election commission members told me in private about conversations with individuals who encouraged them to stuff ballots and falsify the vote in other ways," Manekin says, arguing that Pushilin remains one of Vladislav Surkov's "pet projects." On November 11, 2018, Pushilin was elected the new head of the DNR (winning 60.85 percent of the vote).

Alexander Khodakovsky, DNR state security minister from May 16 to July 16, 2014, Security Council secretary from November 13, 2014, to March 13, 2015. Call sign: "Skif" (Scythian)

Before the war: Khodakovsky was born on December 18, 1972, in Donetsk. After serving in the Soviet army, he worked in law enforcement, and by 2014 he was head of the Ukrainian Security Service's "Alpha" special ops unit in the Donetsk region. When war broke out, he sided with the separatists.

During the war: Khodakovsky created and led the "Vostok" battalion, which later became a full brigade. In the summer of 2014, he became DNR state security minister, and later served as Security Council secretary. He fought directly in several major battles, beginning with the first clashes over the Donetsk airport. To this day, many DNR security forces wear the Vostok chevron insignia on their uniforms, in violation of official regulations.

Eyewitnesses (who asked Meduza not to identify them) say soldiers from Khodakovsky's battalion stole metal and sold off railway cars and other equipment seized from several businesses and mines. Admittedly, there's not a single separatist division that isn't accused of illegal requisitioning and extortion, and their commanders usually justify these incidents as military necessities. Speaking to Meduza, Khodakovsky confirmed that he personally ordered his men to seize and sell off the railcars: "They were decommissioned, discarded, and already partly corroded. The owners had fled, and we needed to survive."

After the war: "Khodakovsky had good connections with the criminal world," says Evgeny Shabaev. "This allowed Vostok to gain control over various commercial interests in Horlivka, Makiivka, and other cities in the Donetsk metropolitan area. By 2016, there was serious infighting between Khodakovsky and Zakharchenko over finances."

In 2018, shortly before Donetsk voted on its new leader, DNR guards at the Russian border suddenly refused, without any explanation, to allow Khodakovsky back into the self-declared republic. Afterwards, he said he no longer has any hope of returning to Donetsk to participate in the region's political life. Many people in Donetsk who spoke to Meduza said they believe Khodakovsky might defeat current DNR leader Denis Pushilin in a free and fair election.

Khodakovsky told Meduza that the DNR's system of government is flawed and based "almost on inheritance law." "If we created a parliament that would incorporate the commanders of various armed groups — decent people — then this parliament would be highly renewable, because the commanders would die out, and others would be elected in their place," he argues.

Khodakovsky says Russia is partly to blame for the region's current economic and social troubles: "Rumor has it that Mr. Surkov said we used assholes to dislodge the assholes. But who are we going to use to dislodge these assholes?"

Today, Khodakovsky chairs the board of the "Donbas Patriotic Forces" voluntary organization, which operates in Russia, where he now lives.

Igor Bezler. Field commander. Call sign: "Bes" (Demon)

Before the war: Bezler was born on December 30, 1965, in Simferopol. A Russian citizen, he served in the Soviet and Russian armies, before leaving for the reserves as a lieutenant colonel. Bezler lived in Gorlovka, a suburb of Donetsk, and worked in the municipal security apparatus. In the spring of 2014, he took part in Russia's annexation of Crimea, and led the Gorlovka "militia" upon his return to the Donbas.

During the war: "Demon had complex relationships with other commanders and militia leaders right from the beginning of the conflict," said Alexander T., a fighter in one of the DNR's elite military divisions. "Things even spilled over into armed clashes. In the summer of 2014, for example, Demon's squad captured a police station in Donetsk. Some of the police officers were injured, and some were killed. Ultimately, fighters from the Vostok and Oplot units were sent in to bring Bezler to reason. Alexander Borodai said publicly at the time that Demon's subdivision doesn't report to anyone. But in the end, they made peace somehow and even put a general's star on Bezler's epaulettes."

Ukrainian special service representatives have called Bezler a Russian military intelligence agent and accused him of kidnapping, torturing, and executing prisoners of war. On one occasion, "Demon" posted a video of his troops shooting two Ukrainian

officers online. It later came to light that the video was staged and that nobody was injured in the process.

After the war: At the end of October 2014, Bezler left the DNR for Russia. Rumors of his return to the breakaway Ukrainian region have spread multiple times since, but they are not true. "Now, Bezler is living modestly in the Crimea," Borodai told Meduza. "He's a relatively private person. Rumor has it that he turned down multiple very interesting job offers from Russia. They say he was even offered the mayor's post in some city in the south, but Igor wanted to fight. I think that even now, he's waiting for some kind of interesting turn of events to break out that he could jump into. Rumor is that Bezler and Pushilin had some kind of talks, but I don't know how they ended."

Meduza was unable to reach Igor Bezler for comment.

Igor Plotnitsky. Head of the "Luhansk People's Republic" (LNR) from August 14, 2014, to November 24, 2017.

Before the war: Plotnitsky was born on June 24, 1964, in the village of Kelmentsy in Ukraine's Chernivtsi region. He worked as a Ukrainian civil servant, monitoring the energy industry and the sale of other non-food products. He started out as head of the "Dawn" battalion in May 2014. Plotnitsky was named defense minister of the LNR by the self-declared republic's ad hoc legislature on May 21, 2014.

During the war: In August 2014, the LNR's first leader, Valery Bolotov, resigned and named Plotnitsky as his successor. Plotnitsky signed both Minsk agreements. During the height of the Ukrainian conflict, he challengedPresident Petro Poroshenko to a duel.

After the war: Plotnitsky survived an assassination attempt many sources close to the situation said was staged. In September 2016, he announced that a coup attempt planned by several high-ranked LNR officials had been prevented. Gennady Tsypkalov, a former prime minister of the breakaway republic, was accused of attempting to mount a revolt and was later found hanging in his jail cell.

On November 23, 2017, a political crisis broke out in Luhansk that forced Plotnitsky to escape to Russia. LNR State Security Minister Leonid Pasechnik moved into Plotnitsky's office, but Internal Affairs Minister Igor Kornet is considered to be the self-declared republic's de facto leader.

Plotnitsky led the LNR for more than three years. Nonetheless, Borodai said he "never once heard anyone say anything good about him" and himself "could never stand to talk to that toad." Ukrainian news sources asserted that Plotnitsky had invested resources exported from the Donbas into a commercial network registered under his son Stanislav's name. Sources close to Russia's special services confirmed that allegation to Meduza. According to Russia's SPARK-Interfax registry, Stanislav Plotnitsky is registered as an independent entrepreneur who owns three discount domestic appliance stores in Russia's

Voronezh region. “People say [Igor Plotnitsky] is living somewhere near Voronezh,” Borodai added.

Meduza was unable to reach Igor Plotnitsky for comment.

The dead

Alexander Zakharchenko. Head of the DNR from August 7, 2014, to August 31, 2018. Call signs: “Zakhar,” “Batya” (Papa). Killed in a bombing in Donetsk on August 31, 2018.

Before the war: Zakharchenko was born on June 26, 1976, in Donetsk. He worked at a mine, and studied law at the Ukrainian Internal Affairs Ministry’s Donetsk Legal Institute, but never graduated. Zakharchenko led a local branch of “Oplot,” an organization dedicated to helping veterans with disabilities and counteracting the romanticization of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators. He also played an active role in the April 2014 revolt and the seizure of administrative buildings in Donetsk.

During the war: Zakharchenko served as the military commandant of Donetsk and as deputy internal affairs minster of the DNR. He created and commanded a battalion and, later, the Oplot brigade. Zakharchenko also fought in several battles.

Those who fought alongside him noted that he took courageous risks on the battlefield and was injured twice (rumor has it that one injury occurred when a tipsy bodyguard shot his boss in the foot). In August of 2014, Zakharchenko replaced Alexander Borodai as the prime minster of the DNR. On November 2, 2014, he received about 75 percent of the vote and became the president of the unrecognized republic. Zakharchenko survived multiple assassination attempts.

Borodai explained his decision to choose Zakharchenko (rather than Khodakovsky) as a successor as follows: “Khodakovsky had already had time to become versed in Ukrainian politics, meaning constant trickery, deals that change 40 times a week, and blackmail. Meanwhile, Sasha Zakharchenko was a fresh face in that sense — an authoritative field commander uncorrupted by politics.”

“Before the war started, Zakhar was close to [Ukrainian oligarch Rinat] Akhmetov’s businesses and worked in his security detail,” said a Russian citizen named Sergey who served in the DNR’s government from 2014 to 2016. “After the war started, he kept lobbying for his former boss’s interests for a time. For example, he made sure there were no interruptions in fuel supplies and raw material deliveries to Akhmetov’s combines and factories, even if that meant getting them across the front lines [between the Ukrainian army and DNR forces]. Most other manufacturers were pressed into serving the revolution pretty quickly.” (Meduza was unable to confirm this information.)

After the war: Every municipality in the breakaway republic was decked out in posters featuring a portrait of Zakharchenko wearing a general’s coat and a national hero’s star

alongside a colorful array of crosses and medals. Over time, Zakharchenko managed to bring all of the DNR's internal affairs under his command, replacing "Russian Spring" activists with people loyal to him.

Alexander "Tashkent" Timofeyev became Zakharchenko's right-hand man. Novaya Gazeta special correspondent Pavel Kanygin, who covered the conflict in eastern Ukraine, confirmed that Zakharchenko and Timofeyev seized control of all of the region's profitable assets in the time they were in power. Sergey, the Russian citizen mentioned above, told Meduza that the pair attempted to receive a share in a coal transport enterprise that supplies Russian fuel to Ukraine and Europe. With Zakharchenko's implicit consent, Timofeyev allegedly demanded that humanitarian volunteers in the Donbas hand over up to half of their food, medicine, and other products, which were all later sold in supermarkets belonging to Zakharchenko's common-law wife. Those who refused to cooperate were sent "to the basement," where, according to Sergey, a significant number of DNR ministers ultimately ended up.

Evgeny Shabaev, who formerly worked as the Donetsk Republic movement's official representative in Russia, partially confirmed Sergey's assertions. "They got a share in all the markets: some chain stores, small businesses, mid-sized businesses, and energy companies. They even sparked a fuel crisis to get a share in the DNR's gas stations. The price of gasoline shot up from 45 rubles to 70 rubles per liter."

Death: Zakharchenko died in an explosion at the Separ Café on August 31, 2018. DNR authorities announced that he had been killed in a terrorist attack carried out by Ukrainian agents, and Borodai also believes that assertion. A majority of Meduza's sources, however, believe that local or Russian special services were behind the attack.

"In the end, Zakharchenko and Tashkent lost their sense of boundaries entirely and started demanding more and more money from schemes that involved not only [Russian-allied oligarch Sergey] Kurchenko but also the FSB and the Old Guard," Sergey explained, using a euphemism for the Russian presidential administration. Shabaev asserted that in 2018, tensions emerged between Zakharchenko and Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian Ukrainian politician suspected of being Vladimir Putin's godfather, as well as "other powerful, shady bigwigs."

Alexander Timofeyev, who was the DNR's vice premier and lead government revenue official at the time of the attack, was injured in the explosion that killed Zakharchenko. Timofeyev currently resides in Russia.

Mikhail Tolstykh. Field commander. Call sign: "Givi." Killed in an explosion at his batallion's base on February 8, 2017.

Before the war: Tolstykh was born on July 19, 1980, in Ilovaisk, outside Donetsk. He served in the Ukrainian army and chose a nickname honoring his grandfather, who fought in World War II. Tolstykh also worked as an industrial climber.

During the war: Beginning in May of 2014, Tolstykh fought under Strelkov in battles near Slovyansk. He led the Somali Battalion, gaining respect among his subordinates for his bravery. Along with "Motorola" (see below), "Givi" became a local favorite among Russian journalists. He even humiliatedprisoners of war on camera on multiple occasions, forcing one group of captured Ukrainian officers to eat their own epaulets. In another video, "Givi" said he was willing to shoot a Ukrainian prisoner extrajudicially. He survived several attempts on his life.

After the war: Sources close to the DNR's military forces told Meduza that "Givi" tried to get into business and even contraband. They said he also took the risk of clashing with Zakharchenko. Another military source said one of Tolstykh's troops had once been arrested for stopping a car that turned out to be carrying contraband under the supposed protection of DNR prosecutors. In an effort to free his subordinate, the commander was said to have shot into the ceiling of his superior's office.

Roman Manekin, however, argued that "Givi" was "absolutely loyal to Zakharchenko and went so far as to criticize his rival, Khodakovsky." Manekin said the commander "wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer" and was a real "adrenaline junkie."

Death: On February 8, 2017, "Givi" was killed in an explosion at his own battalion's base in Makeyevka. Rumors spread immediately that someone had shot a flamethrower through the window of Tolstykh's office, but military experts believe that is extremely unlikely.

A source who was present at the scene shortly after the attack told Meduza he is certain that "Givi" was killed by an improvised explosive device that was brought onto the base, an act that could only have been carried out by one of the subdivision's own troops. Borodai stands by the official version of events: "There is 100 percent certain information about who the main culprit was. It was an embedded SBU agent, and he managed to slip away."

Arsen Pavlov. Field commander. Call sign: "Motorola."
Killed in an explosion in Donetsk on October 16, 2016.

Before the war: Pavlov was born on February 2, 1983, in Ukhta, in the Komi Republic of the Russian SFSR. He served in a Russian marine division and fought in the Chechen wars, and later worked at a car wash in Rostov-on-Don, until fighting began in the Donbas region.

Pavlov arrived in Ukraine in February 2014. According to Igor Strelkov, Pavlov was a member of the so-called "militia" in Crimea and was selected to join a group of soldiers headed for the Donbas.

During the war: Beginning on April 10, 2014, Pavlov led small units to the most intense combat areas around Slovyansk. During that time, "Motorola" recruited enough fighters to expand his unit from 40 members to 200. During Strelkov's retreat from Slovyansk, Pavlov's subdivision covered the main army's movements. In August 2014,

after Strelkov left the Donbas for Russia, Pavlov took charge of the Sparta Batallion and took part in some of the war's most violent battles. In an interview published by the English-language Kyiv Post, Pavlov said he had personally shot 15 prisoners, but he later deniedsaying any such thing.

"Motorola's media promotion began when a group of journalists asked Strelkov to fire his weapon on camera," Shabaev said. "He sent them away, but he did tell them about Motor, who was commanding a subdivision at the time. And Motor didn't just agree to the live video: he set himself up to be taped shooting a PTUR antitank missile for good measure. He's a conspicuous, cool kind of character. And people started bringing him in to build the hype. Motorola started organizing paid tours of the Donetsk airport for journalists." Shabaev recalled that when other DNR subdivisions invited journalists on similar tours, Pavlov consistently sabotaged them and even started shootouts on occasion to scare the journalists away.

"Motorola was a miracle man," Manekin said. "There was no way he could have survived in Semyonovka, near Slovyansk, but he survived. And not only that — he didn't yield his position. Motorola prepared his team meticulously for combat operations, but time after time, he was saved by literal miracles. He didn't do anything to make that happen: he didn't hide; he would go into the sizzling heat of the battle. But he was lucky right up until he died."

According to Manekin, Pavlov came off as a simple man, but "in Donetsk, a lot of people were frustrated at his wife, who would go shopping in the supermarkets there with a whole cadre of bodyguards." Manekin also said "Motorola" was extremely loyal to the breakaway republic's government and even avoided defending his soldiers when they got into trouble with DNR leaders.

Death: On October 16, 2016, Pavlov and his bodyguard were bombed in the elevator of Pavlov's home in Donetsk. Per tradition, DNR leaders blamed Ukrainian special services for the bombing. "He got caught up in some dirty money," said Evgeny Shabaev, who added that it was supposedly Pavlov's own troops who dealt with "Tsypkalov's revolt" in the neighboring LNR.

In September 2016, Igor Plotnitsky had announced that a group of officials led by former Prime Minister Gennady Tsypkalov had supposedly attempted to carry out an armed coup in the LNR. Plotnitsky turned to the DNR for help, saying he "didn't trust" the military units within his own republic. Tsypkalov was arrested and later found hanging in his cell. "Officially, it was named a suicide," Shabaev said. "The fact that the body was missing several finger bones and even a few ribs and limbs didn't give anyone pause." He added that the LNR government acknowledged that Tsypkalov had been killed but blamed SBU agents for his death. When, in 2017, LNR Internal Affairs Minister Igor Kornet overthrew Plotnitsky himself, he said Plotnitsky had staged "Tsypkalov's revolt."

Shabaev suggested that Pavlov may have been dissatisfied with his payment for the expedition into Luhansk. He doubts the official explanation of Motorola's death, saying that in an apartment building where "even the concierge is armed," it is unlikely that a teenager would have been able to construct, install, and trigger an improvised explosive device at the right moment to kill a specific target in an elevator. Shabaev noted that the young suspect's trial still has not taken place.

Pavel Dremov. Field commander and ataman. Call sign: "Batya" (Papa). Killed in a car bombing on December 12, 2015.

Before the war: Dremov was born on November 22, 1976, in the Voroshilovgrad (now Luhansk) region. He fought in Transnistria and Chechnya, and worked as a mason before the war. In the spring and summer of 2014, Dremov created and led a Cossack regiment named for the ataman M.I. Platov, who fought in the Napoleonic Wars. The regiment still holds a significant portion of the front line in the LNR.

During the war: According to a former subordinate named Mikhail, Dremov resisted the Ukrainian army's attempts to take over Stakhanov, Alchevsk, and Pervomaisk. An anonymous source told Meduza that Dremov had organized transports of food and water to residential areas on the front lines.

After the war: Dremov publicly accused Igor Plotnitsky and his circle of maintaining ties with Kyiv officials and oligarchs; profiting by trading coal across the front lines; selling humanitarian aid delivered from Russia in chain stores under their control — and being cowards more generally. The field commander said that if any of his subordinates were attacked, he would reveal corruption and criminal activity within the LNR's leadership using data he supposedly kept on a personal flash drive.

Death: On December 12, 2015, while he was on his way to his own wedding, Dremov was bombed in a car he had received as a wedding gift. The ataman died on site, and his driver died later in a hospital. "Officially, they've blamed Ukrainian diversionary tactics for Pavel Leonidovich's death," his subordinate Mikhail said, "but most servicemembers believe that the republic's government was behind it." Mikhail said either LNR Internal Affairs Minister Igor Kornet, whom the soldier accused of trading drugs across the front lines, or Igor Plotnitsky, who may have "feared a potential rival" in Dremov, may have ordered the attack. Mikhail also accused the breakaway republic's government of inaction in the investigation of the murder: "Even the person who gave him that cursed automobile was allowed to escape to the Ukrainian side. And Nikolai Pinchuk, who kept the ataman's notorious flash drive, was found decapitated in his own bed."

Alexey Mozgovoi. Field commander. Killed in a car bombing on May 23, 2015.

Before the war: Mozgovoi was Cossack by blood. He was born on April 3, 1975, in the village of Lower Duvanka, in the Voroshilovgrad (now Luhansk) region. A protest and armed resistance leader in eastern Ukraine, Mozgovoi was commander of the "Ghost" Brigade.

During the war: Mozgovoi clashed with the LNR leadership, and took the Ghost Brigade to Slovyansk to fight under Igor Strelkov. He later joined Pavel Dremov's subdivision to defend Alchevsk, Stakhanov, and Pervomaisk.

Evgeny Shabaev considers the Ghost Brigade to be one of the separatists' most combat-ready divisions of 4,000 people or less. "People came to him because they knew that [the Ghost Division] won't leave you hanging without a salary. They would follow their agreements honestly," Shabaev said. "Mozgovoi raised money in Russia, but he didn't spend it on himself and those close to him, like many commanders did. Instead, he bought equipment and paid the salaries he had promised."

In October of 2014, Mozgovoi convened a "people's court" in Alchevsk to try two men who had been accused of rape. In an open head count, the city's residents voted to have one shot and the other sent to the front lines. During periods of active combat, this was one of the most common punishments issued. Because those "convicted" in ad hoc courts were tasked with digging trenches and were not issued firearms, they were often killed as soon as shooting broke out.

After the war: Mozgovoi ignored Plotnitsky's call for him not to enter politics, and began organizing negotiations with potentially like-minded field commanders in other brigades. He spoke out in favor of the unification of the DNR and the LNR into a single entity called Novorossiya but simultaneously took part in teleconferences with Ukrainian soldiers, saying the conflict in the country's east was "only advantageous for people who make a profit off it." Mozgovoi accused Plotnitsky and his circle of conspiring with Kyiv, establishing a dictatorship, and ignoring the interests of the people.

Death: On May 7, 2015, Mozgovoi's car was bombed. He received a head wound. Nonetheless, on May 9, he defied Plotnitsky's orders and threats of violence to run a celebratory military parade in Alchevsk. On May 23, Mozgovoi's car was bombed again and immediately targeted with machine gun fire. Mozgovoi died along with his press secretary, two guards, and his driver. Two civilians were also killed.

Leonid Tkachenko, the head of the investigative division in the LNR's prosecutor general's office, said his subordinates were considering multiple potential explanations of the attack, "including diversionary reconnaissance work on the part of Ukraine." Those among Mozgovoi's associates who spoke with Meduza still believe that the commander's assassination was carried out by the "Wagner" private military company. The PMC has gained fame for its activities in Africa but is rumored among Mozgovoi's supporters to have been given its first "test drive" in the Donbas region, where it was supposedly

deployed to carry out “particularly sensitive tasks” for the leaders of eastern Ukraine’s breakaway regions.

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