

Volodymyr Zelensky and the breadbasket-case of Europe

The deep politics of a hybrid regime¹

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1: A Psyop on the People

One recurring phrase in commentary about the 2019 election of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky is: 'It was a case of life imitating art.' After all, runs the boilerplate patter, Zelensky starred in a TV series about an obscure nobody who unexpectedly becomes a reforming president of Ukraine, and then Zelensky himself went on to become president of Ukraine.² But 'a case of life imitating art' this was not. It would probably be more accurate to reverse the cliché, and call Zelensky's election a case of art directing life. Although even that concept doesn't do justice to the enormity and audacity of Zelensky's accession to power, the details of which have hardly been examined by western establishment media.

Servant of the People was a hit Ukrainian TV sitcom that ran for three series in 2015, 2017 and 2019. A political satire, it starred comic actor Volodymyr Zelensky as Vasyl Holoborodko, a frustrated history teacher working in a chaotic and dilapidated state-run school. One day, driven to distraction by the incompetence and corruption he sees all around him, Holoborodko lets loose a tirade of invective against the appalling way in which Ukraine is governed and run. His outburst is uploaded to the internet, and Holoborodko becomes an accidental celebrity, who is then swept into the presidency on a tide of popular support from his fellow-citizens.

The sitcom's Ukrainian viewers were under no illusions about the deadly accuracy of Holoborodko's diatribe. In 2015, when the first series of *Servant of the People* was broadcast, Ukraine was officially one of the most corrupt places

¹ Ukraine has been classified a hybrid regime by the American NGO, Freedom House (9 May 2020); by the University of Gothenburg's 'Varieties of Democracy' project (7 January 2022); and by the intelligence unit of *The Economist* (15 February 2022).

For a definition of hybrid regime, see <<https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/hybrid-regime>>.

² See for example, a BBC story datelined 21 January 2020, fatuously headlined 'The Ukrainian TV show that predicted the future'. <<https://tinyurl.com/4hdm24uv>> or <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200103-the-ukrainian-tv-show-that-predicted-the-future>>.

on the planet, ranked 130th out of 168 countries, in a three-way tie with Panama and Nicaragua.³ The financial declarations of Ukraine's politicians that year showed that the President, Petro Poroshenko, held a total of 26.3 million USD in multiple bank accounts, and owned 104 companies.⁴ At the same time, social inequality was so great that around 65 per cent of Ukrainian citizens lived below the official poverty line. The director of Transparency International's Ukrainian chapter said in 2013:

[S]ome branches of the economy are half controlled by criminal authorities and state structures. When we talk about big political corruption, officials increasingly resemble and behave like mafia bosses, and not like public servants [. . .] all [Ukrainian] fiscal bodies, without exception, are mafia-oriented structures. They use breaking the law as a way to get rich quick.⁵

Vasyl Holoborodko's unexpected ascent to the presidency, and his crusade against corruption, all sounds like a pleasant enough 'everyman' daydream, and the *Servant of the People* show was regarded fondly by Ukrainian viewers for precisely that reason. The big difference between Holoborodko and the actor who portrayed him is that Volodymyr Zelensky was no non-entity. By the time of the first series of *Servant of the People* in 2015, Zelensky had already been well-known to Ukrainian TV viewers for a decade, as one of the comedy actors in the Kvartal 95 troupe, which Zelensky himself had co-founded.⁶ The group had a semi-satirical TV show called *Vecherniy Kvartal* (approximately 'Kvartal in the Evening') which began in 2005 and became wildly popular.⁷ Kvartal 95 was originally commissioned to make eight episodes a year, each performed and recorded in front of various live theatre audiences at venues

³ *Corruption Perceptions Index*, Transparency International, 2015.

See <<https://tinyurl.com/3fu4n8u3>> or <https://icsid.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/parties_publications/C3765/Respondent%27s%20Counter-Memorial/Pi%C3%A8ces%20factuelles/R-0095.pdf>.

⁴ *Foreign Policy*, 4 November 2016. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mr45yz65>> or <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/04/ukraine-corruption-declaration-poroshenko-clinton-trump-russia-oligarch/>>.

Due to the potential for visual confusion when using standard international currency symbols, this essay uses the following abbreviations instead. The euro is EUR; the pound sterling is GBP; the Ukrainian hryvnia is UAH; the US dollar is USD.

⁵ *Radio Svoboda*, 27 May 2013. See <<http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/24998715.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁶ The word Kvartal translates as 'quarter', and is used in the urban and geographical sense. Kvartal 95 is an area in Zelensky's Ukrainian home town of Kryvyi Rih.

⁷ The show ran from 2005 to 2012 on the TV station Inter, and after 2012 on Channel 1+1.

around Ukraine.

The *Vecherniy Kvartal* shows included frequent political jokes, but these were seldom topical due to the unavoidable lag between the live performances and their eventual broadcast. Mostly, these sketches lampooned politicians, caricaturing their foibles and failures in fictive comic scenarios. For example, the mayor of Kyiv, former heavyweight boxer Vitali Klitschko, was portrayed as a borderline simpleton, oblivious to his own stupidity and constantly treated with polite indulgence by frustrated colleagues. The political content of this material was mainly about long-running issues in Ukrainian civil society: e.g. alcoholism or the crumbling road network, which could be relied upon not to become rapidly out of date. 70 per cent of such jokes targeted the sitting Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko (in office from 2014 to 2019), and blamed these social ills on his supposed megalomania and alleged over-involvement in private business. The over-riding message of all *Vecherniy Kvartal's* political jokes was that the country's problems could be solved if Poroshenko and Ukraine's entire political establishment resigned *en masse* or were removed via normal electoral processes.⁸

In terms of artistic development alone, therefore, *Servant of the People* was a logical progression from the political skits of *Vecherniy Kvartal*, where Zelensky had first played a Ukrainian president by portraying Viktor Yushchenko (in office from 2005 to 2010). Zelensky's characterisation of Yushchenko was sympathetic, and became more overtly so when Yushchenko was succeeded by the despised Viktor Yanukovich (in office from 2010 to 2014).⁹ Vasyl Holoborodko, the central character of *Servant of the People*, was something else though. What that something else was only started to become apparent between the second and third series of *Servant of the People*, which were broadcast in 2017 and 2019 respectively.

To be precise, it became apparent on New Year's Eve 2018, when TV station Channel 1+1 (on which the *Vecherniy Kvartal* shows had been

⁸ Natalya Ryabinska (2022); 'Politics as a Joke: The Case of Volodymyr Zelensky's Comedy Show in Ukraine', in *Problems of Post-Communism*, 69:2, 179-191. (DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2020.1816836).

⁹ Steven Derix and Marina Shelkunova, *Zelensky* (London: Canbury Press, 2022) pp. 51-52. A brief historical note is in order. In 2013, President Yanukovich reneged on a plan to sign a deal with the European Union, which had been intended to foster regulatory and constitutional convergence with the EU. Instead, Yanukovich proposed to strengthen Ukraine's relationships with the Russian Federation. Ukraine's so-called 'Euromaidan' is the umbrella term for the widespread protracted public demonstrations that erupted in late 2013, against Yanukovich's double-dealing. By February 2014, the civil disorder had intensified so much that Yanukovich abandoned his presidency and fled to Russia, where (at the time of writing) he still lives. In 2019, Yanukovich was tried in absentia by a Ukrainian court, and found guilty of high treason.

broadcast since 2012) transmitted an unscheduled pre-recorded speech by Volodymyr Zelensky, announcing his intention to stand as a candidate at the forthcoming presidential election of 31 March 2019. As a result of this disruption to 1+1's normal schedules, the expected New Year's address by President Poroshenko was delayed until New Year's Day. Zelensky denied involvement in this rescheduling, and also dismissed it as 'a technical error'.¹⁰

The *Servant of the People* sitcom had created a blurring of the demarcation between the real Volodymyr Zelensky and his portrayal of the character of Vasyl Holoborodko. This blurring was deliberate. Months before Zelensky made his unexpected New Year's Eve announcement, billboard posters had gone up throughout Ukraine, promoting the third series of *Servant of the People*. The posters featured the familiar face of Volodymyr Zelensky, in character as Vasyl Holoborodko, and the enigmatic slogan: 'I'm not kidding.' Just to drive the point home, the poster campaign was augmented by radio advertisements allowing voters to hear that slogan spoken by Zelensky's distinctive voice.

In January 2019, with his election campaign under way, Zelensky openly boasted that he had used ambiguous publicity for the TV show to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and anticipation about his possible candidacy.

We were going to put up boards regardless [. . .] I'll tell you honestly, this is our move, mine in particular. Basically, it saved a lot of money.

The move was very simple – this is an advertisement for *Servant of the People 3*, which, if you turn the key correctly, can also work for the election campaign.¹¹

Zelensky's use of the metaphor 'turn the key' evokes the literary *roman à clef*. Perhaps that genre's long association with true crime was an unconscious factor in Zelensky's mind, given that he was inadvertently confessing to campaign finance fraud. One TV viewer later told researchers:

Somewhere in [your] subconscious you made some, well, not analogies, but you remembered him, this Holoborodko [...] Everyone probably thought that in the film Zelensky showed his [political] program, his aspirations, what he wants to do.¹²

Zelensky was never censured for his manipulative and misleading political

¹⁰ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 98

¹¹ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 1 January 2019. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2019/01/21/7204341/>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹² Kostiantyn Yanchenko (2023), 'Making Sense of Populist Hyperreality in the Post-Truth Age: Evidence from Volodymyr Zelensky's Voters' in *Mass Communication and Society*, 26:3, 509-531 (DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2022.2105234) p. 521.

misuse of commercial advertising. Although it would have been difficult to pin a charge of campaign finance fraud on Zelensky, who had not really campaigned at all in any traditional sense.

He may have been a talented performer when he had a script to work from, but as a political novice Volodymyr Zelensky lacked the spontaneity, insight, and even the basic knowledge required to perform well under the spotlight of media scrutiny. For this reason, he gave few interviews between 1 January 2019 and election day on 31 March; and those that he did give often revealed his inconvenient inconsistencies and self-contradictions.¹³ His main appearances during the campaign period were made as part of *Kvartal 95's* theatrical performances. These were staged during the troupe's yearly national tour, and were filmed and edited into the *Vecherniy Kvartal* TV shows. If this seems a counter-intuitive campaign strategy, that's because it was. *Vecherniy Kvartal* specialised in mocking the incompetence and corruption of Ukraine's political system. The show's theatre audiences already accepted the shows as quasi-political events, and after Zelensky's candidacy was announced the show's material was received as a form of negative campaigning. The association between *Vecherniy Kvartal* and Zelensky's ongoing presidential bid was reinforced by *Kvartal 95's* on-stage use of slogans and catchphrases quoted directly from the *Servant of the People* sitcom.¹⁴ The pincer movement strategy of simultaneously offering both a sustained critique of Ukrainian politics and a crusading 'outsider' candidate was extremely effective. It seems that some voters didn't even consciously metabolise it. One Zelensky voter later told researchers:

[...] *Kvartal* is a constant satire on politics, and I expected that [Zelensky], who was constantly joking about the political system in the country, would manage not to go down that [political] road himself.¹⁵

Rather like Donald Trump, another TV star who unexpectedly became a president, Zelensky circumvented the standard news media with an aggressive online marketing campaign, run by an ad-hoc crew calling themselves *Zekomanda* – 'Team Ze'.¹⁶ Their carefully-cultivated reputation as a spontaneously assembled group of enthusiasts was deceptive. *Zekomanda* was

¹³ Yanchenko (see note 12) notes (p. 517): 'When it came to a traditional interview dedicated to the [first] hundred days of [his] presidency, Zelensky gave it to a fellow actor, who [had] played the role of the prime minister in the *Servant of the People*, rather than to professional journalists.'

¹⁴ Yanchenko (see note 12) pp. 516, 522 and 526

¹⁵ Yanchenko (see note 12) p. 522

¹⁶ After the election, this nickname was sometimes also applied to Zelensky's inner circle.

led by businessman and 'digital technology guru' Mykhailo Fedorov (born 1981). A few years earlier, Fedorov had received USAID money to found an 'I.T. Initiative' in Zaporizhzhia¹⁷ and he had gone on to launch SMMSTUDIO, an online marketing agency in the same city. Under Fedorov's guidance, eight digital handlers and 16 contact centre staff, working around the clock, controlled a barrage of pro-Zelensky social media account publications and interactions.

Fedorov himself oversaw a strategy that tested out forty sociopolitical concepts on different demographic groups, to see which messages appealed to which sets of voters. The findings were then used to produce customised pro-Zelensky material targeting those types of voters. The customised material was also pushed differently on segregated regional online channels, depending on which areas of the country had the demographic groups *Zekomanda* was targetting. Additionally, Fedorov's team ran standard subscription campaigns, and then sent millions of direct marketing emails to hundreds of thousands of signed-up voters. Fedorov was quite open about the fact that *Zekomanda* was ignoring the news media, which he regarded as almost obsolete. He even stated that he felt the Zelensky campaign was not so much evasive as *avant garde*, and that the future would resemble what *Zekomanda* was already doing.

It seems to me that after the presidential election, a surge in the growth of media will begin, which provide cool analytics, which interestingly talk about processes so that their world is colorful, not black and white. Therefore, there will be no problem for Ukrainian journalism. And from the point of view of reporting news, then yes, here, of course, the media will no longer have such relevance.¹⁸

Zekomanda saturated social media with electoral propaganda while telling potential voters almost nothing about what Zelensky stood for. This online astroturfing had been cued well in advance. In the first series of *Servant of the People*, Vasyl Holoborodko's denunciation of state corruption is filmed by his pupils and uploaded to the internet, where it becomes a 'viral' sensation. Zelensky's online campaign was a deliberate and cynical evocation of this fictional spontaneity. The online marketing of Zelensky included contrived photos of supporters wearing conspicuous green clothing, visual branding that

¹⁷ See <<https://gov-after-shock.oecd-opsi.org/member/mykhailo-fedorov/>>.

¹⁸ *New Voice of Ukraine*, 11 April 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/hafr2nc>> or <<https://nv.ua/ukraine/politics/my-ne-rabotaem-na-obraz-goloborodko-didzhital-guru-zelenskogo-raskryl-nv-sekret-yego-strategii-v-socsetyah-50015967.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

would make no sense to anyone outside Eastern Europe.¹⁹ The surname Zelensky is cognate with, and sounds very similar to, the generic place name *Zelyonoe*, a Slavic word meaning 'green'.²⁰ The Zelensky campaign's intrusive over-use of the colour successfully projected its candidate's name at a level below the threshold of conscious verbalisation. By combining this digital push with his live performances and his TV shows, Zelensky managed to generate a very unusual level of electoral appeal. As was later demonstrated by post-election analyses, Zelensky's vote transcended the usual political distributions among different age groups. And yet, more than three-quarters of the Ukrainian electorate admitted they had no idea what Zelensky's policy positions were on the biggest issues facing Ukraine at the time.²¹

Looming in the political background throughout the campaign period – literally, in the case of the huge billboard advertisements – was the indelible idea of Volodymyr Zelensky as President of Ukraine, in the *Servant of the People* TV series. Voters could attend live *Vecherniy Kvartal* performances, then walk home from the theatre, eagerly anticipating the next TV appearance of (the real) Zelensky as Ukraine's (fictional) president. There were effectively three interchangeable Zelenskys at any given moment: the comedy actor, the fictional president and the presidential candidate. It was a comforting and enjoyable parallel universe, where Zelensky's fictional Holoborodko was the heroic 'little man' saying unspeakable truths about the country's ills.

Simultaneously, the real Zelensky was declaring that he was the only person capable of curing those ills. One voter's voice will speak for many:

[*Vecherniy Kvartal*] ridiculed political problems but did not offer any solutions. And here [in the *Servant of the People* series], perhaps, it was a bit childish but, at the same time, we were shown that these

¹⁹ Yanchenko (see note 12) p. 534

²⁰ Significantly, Zelensky's character Vasyl Holoborodko has the same name as a celebrated Ukrainian poet (born 1945 and still alive), who was persecuted and suppressed by the Soviet authorities for three decades. This name identification imparts a touch of pathos and indomitability to Zelensky's fictional president. The real-life Vasyl Holoborodko had to wait until 1988, one of the *glasnost* years, before his first volume of poetry could be published in Ukraine. The book's hope-inspiring title was *Zelen den*, which translates as 'A Green Day'. Entry for Vasyl Holoborodko in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mv9dma5v>> or <<https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CH%5CO%5CHoloborodkoVasyl.htm>>.

²¹ The less than one-quarter of poll respondents who said they understood Zelensky's proposals on such issues may have been subject to wishful thinking, because he had never offered a consistent stance on any of them. *RBC-Ukraine*, 4 April 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/c4pucavd>> or <<https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/news/pozitsiey-zelenskogo-rossii-nato-es-horosh-1554388338.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

problems can be actually solved [. . .] the pressing problems that worry each of us: wages, corruption, utility rates.²²

The third series of *Servant of the People* comprised just three episodes. It was broadcast in the last stages of the election campaign. The first and second episodes were both broadcast on 27 March 2019, just four days before voting commenced. While still satirical, this third series differed from the show's usual contemporary format, presenting instead an imaginary history lesson taking place 30 years in the future. From this science-fiction utopia, President Holoborodko was described as a great leader who had led Ukraine to peace and prosperity. Holoborodko also led Ukraine into membership of both NATO and the European Union – which were real-life political ambitions for Ukraine in the post-Soviet era. Even the absurdist touch of President Holoborodko supposedly having created a mountain of gold in the centre of Kyiv had resonance with voters, given the nationalistic legend of 'Polubotok's Gold'.²³ The final episode of this third series of *Servant of the People* was broadcast the next day, 28 March. This culmination to the long-running media bombardment had dramatic effects on some voters, with one telling researchers:

I'm telling you, when I watched this series, I thought, "God, God, let him become a president!" Those thoughts did not leave me for a long time. And then [Zelensky's team] kept feeding us up with something: first, a new season, then [Zelensky] said he would run [for president], and then this election campaign! There was simply no way to forget it, to get it out of the head!²⁴

By law, political broadcasts are not allowed on Ukrainian media during the 24 hours preceding a general election. So on 30 March 2019, the day before the general election, Ukrainian TV station Channel 1+1 showed nearly eight hours of previous *Kvartal 95* shows starring Zelensky.

The chief intermission to the channel's relentless repeats was an American documentary about another actor who became a president, namely Ronald Reagan. The US programme had been dubbed into Ukrainian, and to make sure no-one could miss the point, the voiceover for Reagan himself was performed by Zelensky.²⁵

²² Yanchenko (see note 12) p. 520

²³ A myth about an 18th-Century Cossack leader who supposedly deposited a huge amount of gold with an English bank at 7.5 per cent interest, with the stipulation that the total would be paid to Ukraine when it eventually achieved independent statehood.

²⁴ Yanchenko (see note 12) p. 521

²⁵ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 102.

Ukraine's independent voters' rights body, the CVU, noticed what was going on. It demanded (perhaps rhetorically) that Zelensky pay for showings of *Servant of the People* out of his campaign funds, because in its new electoral context, the show flagrantly encouraged voters to form associations between a fictional president and the real-life candidate.

CVU believes that showing the video film *Servant of the People* is an activity that encourages voters to vote for Zelensky, who is the lead role in the film, as well as a candidate for President of Ukraine. In addition, the film *Servant of the People* has a political theme, positively depicts the activities of the character [played by] Zelensky, and its name is identical to the name of the political party, the nominee of which is Zelensky in the presidential election.²⁶

Ultimately, Zelensky did not pay for the programmes. After a run-off round of voting on 21 April, he also won the election, with 73 per cent of the vote – a landslide for a comic actor who had no political experience and only the vaguest policy proposals. But by election day, Zelensky, in the guise of Vasyl Holoborodko, had been campaigning as the unofficial opponent of President Poroshenko for four years. Zelensky encouraged voters to identify him with his fictional alter ego by not formally affiliating himself with the political body officially registered as the Servant of the People Party. This allowed Zelensky to be listed on ballot papers as a self-nominated and independent candidate,²⁷ even though that was the exact opposite of the truth.

2: 'Showbiz for ugly people'

Throughout the April 2019 televised debate between Poroshenko and Zelensky, a short, plump, dark-haired man could occasionally be glimpsed lurking behind Zelensky's onstage team. In the final moments of the debate, this dark-haired man stepped to the front of the candidate's entourage. For a few seconds he looked over Zelensky's shoulder, and grinned directly at the TV cameras. He would have been unknown to most viewers of that debate, but Andriy Bohdan was the head corporate lawyer for Channel 1+1, the TV station that had relentlessly promoted Zelensky to the electorate, first as a comic, then as an actor, then as the presidential candidate. Bohdan had held office at both local and national level. At the time of the April debate, Bohdan was also a legal

²⁶ Committee of Voters of Ukraine, 12 February 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mt79nh3e>> or <<http://www.cvu.org.ua/nodes/view/type:news/slug:kvu-zaklykaie-v-zelenskoho-oplatyty-sluhu-narodu-3-iz-vyborchoho-fondu>> (source in Ukrainian).

²⁷ Serhii Rudenko, *Zelensky – A Biography* (Cambridge [UK]: Polity Press, 2022) p. 18

advisor to the official Servant of the People Party, from which Zelensky had so carefully distanced himself throughout the campaign period.

The origins of the Servant of the People Party are shrouded in what looks like deliberate obfuscation. It had been officially registered on 2 December 2017, but Zelensky would later claim that he didn't make his decision to run for president until autumn 2018. At one stage Andriy Bohdan seriously pretended that Zelensky didn't actually decide until 31 December 2018,²⁸ which would have been after Zelensky had already handed his pre-recorded declaration to the Channel 1+1 TV station. That version of events was obviously false, but Zelensky's version of events isn't true either.

Autumn 2018 was the same time the promotion campaign commenced for the third series of *Servant of the People*, with the above-mentioned ambiguous billboard posters of Zelensky going up throughout Ukraine. But as we have seen, Zelensky himself has confessed that the promotional material for the TV series deliberately hinted at his forthcoming presidential run. A poster campaign is inherently preceded by various stages of design, production, and location hire, with circulation and display coming at the very end. So the political ambiguity of the posters was crafted very early on in the process, and perhaps at the outset. These factors mean that Zelensky's decision to seek election was made no later than the summer of 2018, and probably much earlier than that.

But how much earlier? Andriy Bodhan sometimes boasted that he had been the person who first urged Zelensky to seek election to Ukraine's presidency. Bodhan claimed that at some time around 2015 (so while he was still retained by Channel 1+1, and more than two years before the founding the Servant of the People Party) he had told Zelensky:

*You will not need to devote a lot of effort, energy and money for this. [There were] jokes about Servant of the People and the President . . . For me, these were not jokes at all, but a serious phrase that I told him: "Do you even understand that Servant of the People gave people hope? And if you don't even try to do it, then in some certain way you will throw them, let them down. You probably don't need it, but they expect it. Whether you win or not win is another question. But if you don't do this, then you're definitely another person whom people have trusted, and you will let them down."*²⁹ (emphasis added)

²⁸ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 7

²⁹ *New Voice of Ukraine*, 22 May 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdh9rkrn>> or <<https://nv.ua/ukraine/politics/bolshoe-intervyu-nv-s-andreem-bogdanom-moya-zadacha-sinhronizirovat-moloduyu-komandu-s-zakonodatelstvom-50018781.html>> (source in Russian).

2015, it will be recalled, was the year that the first series of the *Servant of the People* sitcom was broadcast.³⁰ This means that the idea of a real-life Zelensky presidency was already fully-formed in Bohdan's mind. Zelensky reportedly rejected Bohdan's idea, insisting that he would become just yet another distrusted Ukrainian politician. It seems that at the same time, in 2015, Bohdan was also encouraging Zelensky to run for election as a People's Deputy in Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada,³¹ perhaps seeing this as a stepping stone for Zelensky on his way to the presidency. According to Bohdan, Zelensky wasn't interested in the Verkhovna Rada, either.

Bohdan wouldn't let the idea drop. In March 2018, he researched Zelensky's viability as a possible presidential candidate. The results showed that Zelensky appeared in the electorate's top six preferred candidates, even though he wasn't actually a candidate and hadn't discussed any plans to become one. Bohdan nagged Zelensky: 'Look, you didn't say a word that you are going into politics, but you already have an excellent launch pad.'³² Bohdan has never explained who funded this voter survey. A situation in which a pollster unilaterally and voluntarily measures public opinion about a potential candidate, in order to pressure the potential candidate into becoming an *actual* candidate, can be justly described as strange.

By this time, i.e. March 2018, the second series of the *Servant of the People* sitcom had concluded six months earlier (November 2017) and the Servant of the People Party had already been created and registered (December 2017). The new party therefore had name recognition, and four per cent of voters expressed their possible support to pollsters – despite the fact that the new party barely even existed on paper. It had no known ideology, no policy proposals, no party structure at local or national level, no independent publicity, and (most obviously) no candidates at all.³³ If we are to believe Bohdan and Zelensky, a TV show had become the impetus for a political party with popular appeal and widespread name recognition; but the man who starred as the President in the TV show was not interested in the idea of

³⁰ The series concluded in November, which puts Bohdan's cajolery toward the end of the year.

³¹ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 29.

The Verkhovna Rada (in English, Supreme Council) is a unicameral legislative body, broadly analogous to the UK's House of Commons. For simplicity's sake, the Verkhovna Rada is referred to here as 'parliament' throughout.

³² *New Voice of Ukraine*, 22 May 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdh9rkrn>> or <<https://nv.ua/ukraine/politics/bolshoe-intervyu-nv-s-andreem-bogdanom-moya-zadacha-sinhronizirovat-moloduyu-komandu-s-zakonodatelstvom-50018781.html>> (source in Russian).

³³ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 17

becoming the party's real-life presidential candidate. This version of events seems inherently implausible.

What makes it even less plausible is the fact that the registration documents for the Servant of the People Party named the party's head as Ivan Bakanov (born 1975). At the time those documents were created – i.e. 2 December 2017 – Bakanov was the CEO of Zelensky's Kwartal 95 production company, a position he had occupied since 2013.³⁴ He was a childhood friend of Zelensky's, when Volodymyr was affectionately known as 'Vova', the two having met while their respective parents were living in the same apartment block in the town of Kryvyi Rih. Zelensky and Bakanov had attended the same schools, and later they had both attended and graduated from Kryvyi Rih's Vadym Hetman Institute of Economics. It is highly improbable, therefore, that 'Vova' was unaware of Bakanov's decision to create a political party named after a hugely-successful TV show they had both worked on.

As President, Zelensky saw no conflict in parachuting Andriy Bohdan from his role as the legal advisor to the Servant of the People Party into the civil service role of presidential Administration Leader (roughly analogous to the UK government role of Cabinet Secretary). This appointment had been anticipated for some time. A month before the presidential election, journalists had asked Bohdan about the possibility of his assuming a government role and whether the public would be justified in thinking such a role was a conflict of interest. Bohdan's reply could be generously called the incomplete truth:

There is no conflict here. What you are hinting at, I hear many times from everyone [. . .] From the moment I go somewhere to work, my lawyer's license is suspended. As soon as I leave, my lawyer's licence is reinstated.

The only slightly less-incomplete truth turned out to be much worse. Bohdan was statutorily barred from working within the Administration of the President of Ukraine, due to Ukraine's lustration law.³⁵ Five days after Zelensky took office, Ukraine's Lustration Committee – a panel appointed by Ukraine's supreme court, to monitor state activity for compliance with the lustration law – announced it was taking the Zelensky government to court to reverse

³⁴ Chesno, 4 September 2018. See <<https://www.chesno.org/post/721/>> (source in Ukrainian).

³⁵ A legislative 'purge' enacted after the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, which barred his associates and appointees from holding public office. Bohdan had served as a governmental commissioner throughout Yanukovich's four year tenure.

Bohdan's illegal re-employment.³⁶ To get round this obstacle, Zelensky and his inner circle chose malicious compliance with the letter of the lustration law.³⁷ One month after taking office, Zelensky saved Bohdan's job with a bureaucratic *coup de theatre*. He formally abolished the title 'Administration of the President of Ukraine'³⁸ and renamed the existing structure 'The Office of the President' instead.³⁹

His job secured, Bohdan reportedly became Zelensky's 'de facto Vice-President',⁴⁰ but it would be more accurate to say that, for the most part, Zelensky became Bohdan's stenographer. The politically-experienced Bohdan supervised the drafting of legislative bills, controlled Zelensky's diary, and acted as host for unofficial guests to the office. He read 'every document that landed on Zelensky's desk', and insulated the President by airing policy ideas in order to see how the public responded.⁴¹ During the presidential debate in April 2019, Bohdan had been photographed whispering prompts into Zelensky's ear while the TV cameras were trained on his opponent, President Poroshenko.⁴² After the election, 'it seemed that Bohdan's strength and omnipotence could be surpassed by no-one'.⁴³ It also seems that Bohdan's close and abiding influence over Zelensky had been part of the plan all along.

³⁶ National News Agency of Ukraine ('Ukrinform'), 25 May 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yvd5pnvx>> or <<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/2707995-public-lustration-committee-files-lawsuit-over-bohdans-appointment-as-head-of-presidential-administration.html>>.

³⁷ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 32

³⁸ Presidential Decree 417/2019, *Issues of ensuring the activities of the President of Ukraine*, dated 20 June 2019. See <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4172019-27609>> (source in Ukrainian).

³⁹ Bohdan himself later pretended that the renaming was merely semantic modernisation: 'With regard to renaming the Office, this is the right European tradition that we support [...] And in developed European countries there is the Office of the President.' Interview with *BBC News Ukraine*, 16 September 2019. See <<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-49694823>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁴⁰ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 34. There is no vice-presidency in Ukraine's constitutional system. After the president, the next person in the chain of command is the speaker of the Ukrainian parliament.

⁴¹ *New Voice of Ukraine*, 10 August 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/7d6u3a6c>> or <<https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/politics/andriy-bogdan-druga-lyudina-pislya-zelenskogo-v-ukrajini-50036730.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁴² *Kyiv Post*, 21 April 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3unhd934>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/investigation-reveals-more-links-between-zelenskiys-team-and-oligarch-kolomoisky.html>>.

⁴³ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 32

Safely ensconced in office and with Bohdan running his official duties, Zelensky picked as his principal presidential aide a man called Sergiy Shefir (born 1964), who had never had any experience of government.⁴⁴ Shefir was a co-founder with Zelensky of the Kvartal 95 production company, and a scriptwriter for the troupe's TV series *Vecherniy Kvartal*. This is, to put it mildly, an unusual resumé for a presidential aide. It gives the overall appearance that Zelensky was to be heavily reliant on Shefir for managing his public image. Shefir himself has said,⁴⁵ rather elliptically, that his purpose in office was to 'maintain [Zelensky's] humanity in politics'. According to the Office of the President, Shefir's job was neither a civil service role nor a freelance one, which put him outside the rules governing either.

Zelensky and Shefir had been close friends since 1995 and had usually shared apartments while briefly living in Moscow. In 2008 Zelensky bought a large house in a gated complex south of Kyiv. Shefir lived next door, and their two families were so interknit that they usually went on holiday together.⁴⁶ While working in the Office of the President, Shefir continued to steer the *Vercherniy Kvartal* productions, sometimes telling the comedy team which jokes were unacceptable due to what Shefir said were political inaccuracies. According to one Kvartal 95 scriptwriter: '[O]ur authors wander somewhere in their thoughts and he [Shefir] can say "No".'⁴⁷

Three more Kvartal 95 employees joined the staff of the formal Office of the President. Kvartal 95's director of development, Iryna Pobedonostseva, was appointed head of the office's Information Policy Department. Executive producer Sergei Trophimov became First Deputy Head of the Office of the President, and Trophimov's sub-deputy head was Yuri Koscius, a former screenwriter who had also been creative producer of the *Servant of the People* TV series. Zelensky's stage management and showrunners were firmly in position. But if the Zelensky presidency were to successfully cast its spell over Ukrainians, like a triumphant realisation of the *Servant of the People* sitcom, it needed a strong supporting cast.

Zelensky's inaugural address on 20 May 2019 included his dissolution, by executive fiat, of the sitting Ukrainian parliament. Zelensky's announcement

⁴⁴ Channel 24 News, 22 May 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/ywf7wfcv>> or <https://24tv.ua/ru/sergej_shefir_biografija_pervogo_pomoshhnika_prezidenta_zelenskogo_n1156713> (source in Russian).

⁴⁵ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 101

⁴⁶ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 62

⁴⁷ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 25 October 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2021/10/25/7311510/>> (source in Ukrainian).

was designed and scripted by Andriy Bohdan,⁴⁸ and it automatically meant there would be early elections, eventually scheduled for 21 July 2019. When the polls closed on that date, the Servant of the People Party had pulled in 45 per cent of those voting. (Votes were cast by less than 50 per cent of the electorate – the lowest turnout in modern Ukrainian history.) The party that had only existed on paper suddenly had 254 deputies in Ukraine’s 450-seat parliament.⁴⁹ It was the first time a political party in post-Soviet Ukraine had won an absolute majority.⁵⁰

The party’s 254 newly-elected parliamentary Deputies included 12 who came direct from Zelensky’s own Kvartal 95 production company.⁵¹ These included: Oleksandr Kabanov, a scriptwriter; Yuriy Koryavchenkov, the company’s administrative director; Yuriy Kostyuk and Serhiy Sihokvo, both Kvartal creative producers; and Olha Rudenko, a Kvartal press officer. Olha Rudenko’s sister, Tatyana Rudenko, was head of the Kvartal press office until Zelensky made her a board member on the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting. By appointing Tatyana Rudenko to the media watchdog, the entertainer-politician Zelensky ensured he had a friendly insider on a body that is meant ‘to guarantee the freedom of speech and the right of citizens to information; to protect the rights of the audience, users, workers and distributors of audio-visual information.’⁵²

In June 2019, with six weeks before the election, the Servant of the People Party had published an open letter via Facebook, warning the nation’s political establishment: ‘We are involving new ambitious politicians in our party who are not connected to the old system. Be sure that you will not see any current MP in the party list [of] “Servant of the People”.’⁵³ The bulk of

⁴⁸ *New Voice of Ukraine*, 10 August 2019. See footnote 41, above. Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) note (p. 110) that Zelensky’s address included a quote from Ronald Reagan: ‘The government cannot solve our problems; the government is our problem.’

⁴⁹ 26 of those 450 seats were not available in 2019, as they represented the breakaway Donbas republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

⁵⁰ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 21

⁵¹ See e.g. Rudenko pp. 76-78.

There were a further two dozen SOTP Deputies from Zelensky’s showbiz career prior to the formation of the Kvartal 95 company. For example Ityna Borzova, daughter of Zelensky’s co-host on a TV show called ‘The League of Laughter’, and Ihor Kroyosheev, one of the performers on the same programme.

⁵² See <<https://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/855>>.

⁵³ *Glavcom*, 7 June 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2huzuxy9>> or <<https://glavcom.ua/country/society/leshchenka-ne-vzyali-u-spisok-partiji-sluga-narodu-600253.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

Zelensky's newly-elected Deputies were indeed ordinary Ukrainians, everyday people who had been enthused and inspired to enter politics by Zelensky's 'Holoborodko' mythos. This seeming fulfilment of the earlier promise enhanced Zelensky's populist image as a scourge of Ukraine's corrupt political elite, and obscured somewhat the dozens of entryists from Zelensky's showbusiness network. Most of the new Deputies had 'very average educational backgrounds and limited [political] knowledge'.⁵⁴ Andriy Bohdan later bragged: 'We just put a sticker saying "Team Zelensky" on someone and we had a winning candidate.'⁵⁵

The newly-elected People's Deputies were inaugurated when parliament reopened on 29 August. The all-powerful Servant of the People Party immediately hijacked the parliamentary committee system. Of the 23 parliamentary committees, 19 were now headed by Servant of the People Party figures, with a further 49 deputy heads and committee secretaries. The nominations were made without any debate, and the voting was just a formality. Members of other parties cried 'Shame! Shame!' but were powerless to intervene.⁵⁶

As a bloc, the Servant of the People Party's 254 new People's Deputies had no political experience at all. A bare handful of members had the professional experience required to adequately scrutinise draft legislation. Zelensky could now put before parliament almost any changes in the law he wanted, with a near-guarantee that his ideas would be facilitated at the committee stage, passed at the parliamentary vote, and then sent back to him for his signature. Parliament had become 'one of the divisions of the Office of the President', and 'all political power in Ukraine passed solely into the hands of Volodymyr Zelensky'.⁵⁷

3: A Dictablanda and the Deep State ⁵⁸

Zelensky's parliamentary majority meant he had a free hand to appoint his own prime minister and cabinet at last, having inherited the incumbents from

⁵⁴ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 21

⁵⁵ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 113

⁵⁶ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 29 August 2019. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/08/29/7224813/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁵⁷ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 23

⁵⁸ Dictablanda: 'A relaxed dictatorship, in comparison with other types' – definition by the Spanish Royal Academy. See <<https://dle.rae.es/dictablanda>> (source in Spanish).

President Poroshenko.⁵⁹ Zelensky made four of his new appointments from existing staff of the Office of the President: Oleksiy Honcharuk became Prime Minister;⁶⁰ Ruslan Ryaboshapka became State Prosecutor-General; and Vadym Prystaiko became Minister for Foreign Affairs.

With someone he saw as his placeman in charge of state prosecutions, Zelensky began to push for legal action against his presidential predecessor. During the presidential election debate of April 2019, Zelensky had condemned Poroshenko's conduct in office and repeatedly taunted him with the prospect of criminal charges and potential imprisonment. Now Zelensky tried to make good on those threats. The President's office inundated Prosecutor-General Ruslan Ryaboshapka with cooked-up criminal complaints against Poroshenko. In vain, Ryaboshapka tried to tell Zelensky that the president could not just order prosecutions, and that evidence had to be treated in accordance with the principles of due process. On 5 March 2020, Zelensky dismissed Ryaboshapka, telling him privately: 'If you're not getting results, you shouldn't be here.' The official formulation was that Ryaboshapka had been 'invited to leave'.⁶¹ Ryaboshapka later said: 'What [the President's office] put on my desk was just legal garbage. There was no evidence [against Poroshenko] whatsoever.'⁶²

While he was being badgered by Zelensky to prosecute Poroshenko, Ryaboshapka had found a separate investigation of his was being blocked by Ivan Bakonov, chief of Ukraine's internal security service, the SBU (Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy, roughly analogous to the UK's MI5). Ryaboshapka had been looking into the long-running PrivatBank scandal, which had shocked Ukraine when it came to light in 2016. The private-sector bank, which held the accounts of 20 million Ukrainian citizens⁶³ was found to be insolvent and on the verge of outright collapse. PrivatBank was hurriedly nationalised by the Poroshenko government in December 2016, in order to prevent it causing a

⁵⁹ In the Ukrainian parliamentary-presidential constitutional system, the president appoints the prime minister and selects cabinet members.

⁶⁰ Honcharuk had only enrolled with the Office of the President in May that year, when he was recruited by Andriy Bohdan. Before that, Honcharuk had worked at a think-tank which produced policy ideas about preparing Ukraine for EU membership. *Ukrainian Pravda*, 31 July 2019. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2019/07/31/7222432/>>.

⁶¹ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 155

⁶² Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 126

⁶³ For perspective, in 2016 Ukraine's total population was approximately 45 million. Privatbank held the accounts of 500,000 students, 1.6 million state benefits claimants, and 3.2 million pensioners. *Euromaidan Press*, 21 December 2016. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2aa7vw3e>> or <<https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/12/21/nationalization-of-ukraines-largest-bank-privatbank-explained/>>.

wider economic crisis. This initial bailout alone cost the Ukrainian government the equivalent of 4 billion GBP.

An independent audit commissioned by the state-run National Bank of Ukraine had found that PrivatBank had 'lost' the local equivalent of 5.5 billion USD due to 'large scale and coordinated fraud over at least a ten-year period ending December 2016'. In Ukrainian hryvnia, this was roughly five per cent of Ukraine's GDP at the time, and represented 33 per cent of the total of balances held at the bank by the general public. Ryaboshapka's investigation into the PrivatBank case required a separate forensic audit, to establish how much the 2016 nationalisation had cost the state. Ryaboshapka's audit needed to be conducted by the SBU, but SBU chief Bakanov refused to order it. Zelensky's dismissal of Ryaboshapka took place within days of Bakanov's sabotage.⁶⁴

SBU chief Ivan Bakanov, who stymied Ryaboshapka's investigations, was Zelensky's lifelong friend who had founded the Servant of the People Party on 2 December 2017, discussed above. That formality was Bakanov's first and to date only involvement in party politics. He therefore had no experience whatsoever of governance or intelligence work, and was not in any way a suitable person to be put in charge of a state security body. Nevertheless, Bakanov had been appointed deputy chief of the SBU on the second day of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency.⁶⁵ Zelensky also promoted Bakanov (who had no military experience either) to Lieutenant in the Ukrainian army. This appears to have been Zelensky's way of giving Bakanov high-level security clearance.⁶⁶ Soon after Zelensky installed Bakanov as SBU deputy chief, the serving chief of the SBU went on unexplained leave. He never returned, and in August 2019 Bakanov got promoted.

Bakanov's new job as chief of the SBU was augmented by other Zelensky appointees in Ukraine's security structure, which together give some indication of how deeply Zelensky intended to infiltrate the state apparatus. Kwartal 95 creative director Sirhiy Sivokho was appointed advisor to the Secretary of the

⁶⁴ According to Ryaboshapka, Bakanov's sabotage took place in March 2020. Ryaboshapka himself was dismissed on 5 March 2020, which was a Thursday. This means the confrontation with Bakanov had taken place earlier the same week. *Kyiv Post*, 30 April 2020. See <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/riaboshapka-zelensky-has-lost-his-way.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁶⁵ Presidential Decree 316/2019, *The appointment of I. Bakanov as the First Deputy Head of the Security Service of Ukraine*, dated 22 May 2019. See <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3162019-27181>>.

⁶⁶ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 11 June 2019. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/06/11/7217810>> (source in Ukrainian).

National Security and Defence Council (NSDC).⁶⁷ The previously-unknown Olexander Pashkov was made director of the Ministry of Defence's Department of Strategic Intelligence, seemingly because he was married to one of Kvartal 95's accountants. Zelensky's new chief of Ukraine's Foreign intelligence Service, the SRZU,⁶⁸ Vladislav Bukharev, was from a respectable security background, and had the decisive qualification of being married to a Kvartal 95 scriptwriter.⁶⁹

In March 2020, after Prosecutor-General Ruslan Ryaboshapka had been stonewalled by Bakanov and then dismissed by Zelensky, the next state prosecutor was more amenable to Zelensky's schemes. Iryna Venediktova (born 1978) had been elected to parliament as a Servant of the People Party member, nine months earlier. In December 2019, Venediktova became acting director of the State Bureau of Investigations when Zelensky dismissed the serving director.⁷⁰ Zelensky apparently forgot to clear this nakedly-political appointment with parliament, which then had to take unilateral action to remove Venediktova from her elected seat.⁷¹ Venediktova had barely been at the State Bureau of Investigations for three months when Zelensky uprooted her again, as Ryaboshapka's replacement.⁷² By September of 2020, Prosecutor-General Venediktova had obligingly brought 58 separate criminal cases against ex-President Poroshenko⁷³ – none of which succeeded. Ruslan Ryaboshapka's thwarted PrivatBank investigation, on the other hand, was quietly forgotten; but Zelensky's executive interference with the judicial branch was just getting started.

⁶⁷ The NSDC is the President's formal interface with Ukraine's various state security and intelligence bodies, which it helps to oversee and coordinate. The nearest UK equivalent is the Joint Intelligence Committee, except the UK committee is neither executive nor personally chaired by the head of state.

⁶⁸ Sluzhba Zovnishn'oyi Rozvidky Ukrayiny

⁶⁹ *Committee of Voters of Ukraine*, 15 May 2020. See <<https://tinyurl.com/4dj9hp3u>> or <<http://www.cvu.org.ua/nodes/view/type:news/slug:za-rik-na-derzhavnykh-posadakh-opynylysia-ponad-30-kvartalivtsiv-i-ikh-znaiomykh>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁷⁰ Presidential Decree number 960/2019, *On the release of R. Trub from the post of Director of the State Bureau of Investigations*, dated 27 December 2019. See <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/9602019-31697>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁷¹ *Ukrainian News*, 14 January 2020. See <<https://ukranews.com/en/news/677344-rada-terminates-mp-venediktova-s-mandate>>.

⁷² Presidential Decree number 90/2020, *On the appointment of I. Venediktova as the Prosecutor General*, dated 17 March 2020. See <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/902020-32757>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁷³ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 126

In October 2020, Ukraine's Constitutional Court ruled that an anti-corruption law, dating from 2016, was unconstitutional.⁷⁴ The 2016 law had imposed strict penalties on public officials who did not accurately declare any outside interests. The Constitutional Court's 2020 ruling was that the penalties imposed by the 2016 law were disproportionately harsh. Despite the fact that the law in question dated from the Poroshenko presidency, Zelensky spun the Constitutional Court's ruling as an assault on his own anti-corruption pledges. Rather than simply introduce a new, less draconian anti-corruption law, Zelensky put a bill to the Ukrainian parliament intended to overturn the Constitutional Court's ruling and dismiss the court itself.⁷⁵

Zelensky's own conduct was itself unconstitutional – or, in plain language, beyond merely corrupt. Neither the president nor parliament had or has the power to overturn the decisions of the Constitutional Court or sack its judges. On 30 October 2020 Zelensky, as was by now his custom, bypassed the news media and his own presidential office by addressing Ukraine via Facebook. Zelensky warned: 'On Hallowe'en all the political demons show their faces, and you know who they are.'⁷⁶ He denounced an imaginary 'conspiracy against the President and the country' which supposedly involved 'oligarchs and members of the old [political] elite'.⁷⁷

On 31 October, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, which monitors constitutional law – Ukraine has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1995 – tactfully bypassed Zelensky and wrote directly to the Speaker of Ukraine's parliament instead, warning that:

Terminating the mandate of the judges is in blatant breach of the [Ukrainian] Constitution and of the fundamental principle of separation of powers. Violating the Constitution, even if for an arguably good

⁷⁴ The Constitutional Court functions semi-analogously to an upper parliamentary chamber. It scrutinises and interprets the legislative output of the unicameral Verkhovna Rada.

⁷⁵ Zelensky may have felt emboldened by a similar previous success. Just over a year earlier, he had dismissed the entire Central Election Commission, Ukraine's independent electoral watchdog, claiming it was ineffective, politically-biased, and borderline criminal. He had then replaced all the commissioners with appointees from his own Servant of the People Party. *BBC Ukraine*, 13 September 2019. See <<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-49646927>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁷⁶ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 137

⁷⁷ The grain of truth in Zelensky's rantings was the indisputable fact that four of the court's 18 judges had been appointed during the Yanukovich presidency (2010 to 2014). However: Yanukovich himself was in exile in Russia; four judges do not constitute any kind of majority on a panel of 18; and in any case, Zelensky offered absolutely no evidence that the court was part of any supposed conspiracy.

cause, cannot lead to a culture of constitutionalism and respect for the rule of law, which the fight against corruption pursues.

We appreciate that you are facing a very serious challenge, and we do not underestimate the need for timely, firm and decisive action. We urge you nonetheless to consider the adverse, profound and long-term implications for your country of a possible rushed decision to dismiss the constitutional justices. We encourage you to explore possible alternative ways of ensuring that the fight against corruption in line with international standards remains a priority for your country.⁷⁸ (Emphasis supplied)

The Venice Commission's warning paid off. When it eventually became clear that his unconstitutional bill was not going to get through parliament despite his party's majority, Zelensky instead suspended the chief justice of the Constitutional Court, on the grounds that the state prosecutor merely *suspected* him of bribery and forgery. No formal charges were ever brought against the judge, and the suspension was lifted two months later. At which point, Zelensky – having finally accepted that he had no power to dismiss a sitting judge – simply pulled the chief justice's job out from under him, by revoking the decree that had appointed him in the first place.⁷⁹

By February 2021, Zelensky had had enough of parliament and the judicial branch, and reached into his arsenal of executive powers instead. He invoked Ukrainian anti-terrorism laws in order to use the National Security and Defence Council to silence opponents with 'sanctions'. Media magnate and oligarch Taras Kozak owned three TV stations that often criticised Zelensky, and which (in Zelensky's contention) frequently broadcast undisguised Russian propaganda. Kozak's TV stations were shut down and banned from broadcasting, and his personal assets were frozen for five years. Three days after rubber-stamping the closure of Kozak's TV stations, the NSDC pressured social media giant YouTube into closing the stations' online accounts, which automatically deleted all their videos too.⁸⁰ A fortnight later, Zelensky

⁷⁸ <<https://tinyurl.com/42wpw2au>> or <<https://rm.coe.int/joint-greco-venice-commission-letter-speaker-verkhovna-rada/1680a02cfd>>

⁷⁹ The justice system in Ukraine is not renowned for its transparency or propriety. While the level of corruption in Ukraine's judiciary is hard to quantify, only 2.4 per cent of Ukrainians polled in 2015 expressed unqualified confidence in the court system, and 51.4 per cent did not trust the courts at all. Ilko Kucheriv Foundation for Democratic Initiatives, 3 August 2015. See <<https://dif.org.ua/article/komu-bilshe-doviryayut-ukraintsi-vladi-gromadskosti-zmi>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁸⁰ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 5 March 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/03/5/7285709/>> (source in Ukrainian).

sanctioned Kozak's wife, to prevent any sly sanction-evading transfers. At the same time, Zelensky sanctioned the oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, an elected parliamentary Deputy, for being both pro-Russia and too closely connected to Kozak. Medvedchuk's wife was also sanctioned, and Medvedchuk himself was then put under house arrest for good measure.⁸¹

While Kozak and Medvedchuk were being silenced – with, it must be said, broad public support – a list of critics of the Ukrainian government was accidentally published online (and then deleted) by the Ministry for Digital Transformation.⁸² President Zelensky had created the Ministry for Digital Transformation early in his presidency, and had then nominated as its head someone who had never even been elected to public office. The new 'minister for digital' was Mykhailo Fedorov, the Zaporizhzhia businessman who had run Zelensky's online but off-the-books election campaign.⁸³ On the very first day of parliamentary business after the elections of July 2019, Zelensky put Fedorov's nomination to the assembled People's Deputies for approval. Zelensky's newly-elected majority of political novices obediently handed Fedorov his newly-invented ministerial role.⁸⁴

In August 2021, the Ukrainian SBU had blocked Ukrainian internet access to numerous supposedly subversive websites. These included Russia-based news outlets such as *Vedomosti* and *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. Other blocked websites included Strana.ua and Sharij.net, two online newspapers, each published by a Ukrainian journalist. By 2021 both journalists had already fled the country, claiming political persecution. Strana.ua founder Ihor Guzhva (born 1974) successfully claimed asylum in the European Union in 2018, and then went on to achieve the double accolade of having his website banned by Russia as well. Sharij.net founder Anatoly Shariy (born 1978) successfully claimed asylum in the European Union in 2012. Shariy was arrested inside the EU in 2022, pending extradition by the Zelensky government. Spanish prosecutors rejected the extradition warrant when Ukrainian authorities did not provide documentation to support their bogus charges. Shariy had supposedly committed high treason by publishing a map of Ukraine that did not include the

⁸¹ Perhaps coincidentally, shortly before Medvedchuk's arrest, opinion polls had shown that more Ukrainians would vote for Medvedchuk's political party (Opposition Platform – for Life) than would vote for Zelensky's Servant of the People Party.

⁸² *BYKVU*, 3 March 2021. See <<https://tinyurl.com/4hu4pn6d>> or <<https://bykvu.com/ua/bukvy/ministerskij-spisok-kritikiv-mincifri-opinivsjja-u-vilnomu-dostupi/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁸³ Discussed on page 6 above.

⁸⁴ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 29 August 2019. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/08/29/7224810/>> (source in Ukrainian).

would-be secessionist Donbas region.

The Zelensky government had always been open about its policy of bypassing journalists. Inevitably the clampdown soon bit Ukraine's own long-established independent media.⁸⁵ Almost as soon as Zelensky had appointed Iryna Venediktova as State Prosecutor-General in March 2020 (replacing Ruslan Ryaboshapka, who had been 'invited to leave', as discussed above), Venediktova sued *Ukrainian Pravda* for a report stating that her husband had exercised undue influence on her work.⁸⁶ Over the next few months, the English-language *Kyiv Post* published several articles criticising Venediktova's performance as Prosecutor-General. In November, Venediktova peremptorily summoned the *Post's* editor to her office, and threatened to sue him for defamation. Although the threatened legal action never materialised, it had a 'chilling' effect on the *Post's* coverage. No more stories criticising the Prosecutor-General appeared until September 2021, at which point Venediktova opened a series of criminal investigations into the *Post's* owner, Adnan Kivan.⁸⁷ None of Venediktova's vexatious investigations into Kivan resulted in a prosecution, and Venediktova's private civil case against *Ukrainian Pravda* was ultimately thrown out by the Supreme Court.⁸⁸

As the end of 2021 approached, Zelensky's National Security and Defence Council had grown from 160 members to 237, and had extrajudicially 'sanctioned' 150 state employees and 1,162 private Ukrainian citizens. Zelensky's deputy chairman on the NSDC told the public that Ukraine ought to abandon its current constitutional arrangements and become a purely presidential republic, in which a strong and decisive leader could provide the

⁸⁵ It is worth noting that Zelensky's Culture and Information Minister was Oleksandr Tkachenko, who had been Director-General of the 1+1 Media Group (owners of Channel 1+1) until he entered politics as a People's Deputy at the elections of July 2019.

⁸⁶ This story was about a case of ministerial corruption, but the supposedly-offending material touched upon Venediktova's previous job as acting head of the State Bureau of Investigation. *Ukrainian Pravda*, 28 January 2020. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2020/01/28/7238587/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁸⁷ A few weeks later, in November 2021, Kivan sacked all the *Post's* existing staff (in an announcement made via Facebook), and relaunched the English-language *Post* as a Ukrainian-language publication. Kivan denied being pressured by the government, but said that from now on the *Post* would concentrate on stories that were 'more positive'. *Detector Media*, 15 November 2021. See <<https://tinyurl.com/ms6u9xm9>> or <<https://detector.media/community/article/193820/2021-11-15-na-kyiv-post-tysnuly-genprokurorka-iryna-venediktova-ta-deputaty-vid-slugy-narodu-zhurnalistka/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁸⁸ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 21 December 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/12/21/7318142/>> (source in Ukrainian).

country with the stability it needed.⁸⁹ Zelensky was pleased with this progress, and in October told Ukrainians, rather ominously, that:

[. . . T]he NSDC [. . .] has proven extremely effective as an institution. The financial cliques, the oligarchs, and the traitors are afraid, they feel the pressure daily. And people appreciate it, society has faith. *If you are a traitor, we will put you in your place.*⁹⁰ (Emphasis supplied.)

But it wasn't just 'the financial cliques, oligarchs, and traitors' who were feeling the pressure. Zelensky's frequently vaunted anti-corruption reforms (to say nothing of his government's unwritten policy of abusing the media) kept attention away from the suffering of Ukraine's own citizens. While Zelensky was busy consolidating his political control over the Ukrainian state, a US inquiry into human rights in Ukraine was under way. Its published findings for the year 2021 included:

credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment of detainees by law enforcement personnel; [. . .] arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; [. . .] serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship; serious restrictions on internet freedom; [. . . and] serious acts of government corruption⁹¹

It is true that most of these abuses were ongoing long before Zelensky's election in 2019. However, it is also true that none of them had stopped afterward, and some had actually become even worse.

4: Zelensky, architect of his own fortune

On the afternoon of 3 October 2021, Ukrainian journalist Anna Babinets received an email from a man called Oleksiy Prasol. Mr Prasol was the manager of the Mala Opera theatre, in Kyiv, and had some unfortunate news to impart. There had been a power failure at the theatre, and repairs were under way. As a result, the theatre's scheduled film showing at 7pm was cancelled. So Anna

⁸⁹ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 25 October 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/10/25/7311555/>>.

⁹⁰ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 143

⁹¹ US Department of State, April 2022. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mrxu7at5>> or <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/313615_UKRAINE-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>.

Babinets visited the theatre and saw that the venue was functioning normally, with no signs of a power cut. She also observed that the theatre's own posters advertising that evening's film had disappeared. The film was one that Ms Babinets had personally worked on, and it was about President Zelensky and his associates from Kvartal 95. Ms Babinets did what any good journalist would do, and used social media to expose the theatre's spurious cancellation of the film.⁹²

Public reaction to Ms Babinets's revelation was strong enough to magically fix the theatre's supposed electrical problems, so the film's premiere went ahead as scheduled after all. It later transpired that someone had called local government officials and threatened unspecified 'problems' if the film was not withdrawn. The caller identified himself as SBU chief Ivan Bakanov, Zelensky's lifelong friend.⁹³ A bit of journalistic digging revealed that the caller was really an SBU officer by the name of Oleksandr Novikov, who for some reason felt empowered to use Bakanov's name and thus give his threats the implicit backing of the President.⁹⁴

The film at the centre of all this intrigue was called *Offshore 95*. Its premiere at the Mala Opera theatre had had been scheduled to coincide with the release of news stories based on the so-called Pandora Papers, these being some 12 million leaked documents belonging to just 14 financial management service companies based around the world.⁹⁵ The Pandora Papers showed that Zelensky and his showbusiness associates had a network of offshore accounts, which they had set up in three notorious tax havens: Belize; the British Virgin Islands; and Cyprus.

There had never been any doubt that Zelensky and his colleagues were extraordinarily wealthy by Ukrainian standards. The above-mentioned *Vecherniy Kvartal* show was so wildly popular with Ukrainian viewers that it eventually ran for over a decade. (A survey in 2019 found that 85.3 per cent of Ukrainians had watched the show.) Kvartal 95 was commissioned to make

⁹² Facebook, 3 October 2021. See <<https://www.facebook.com/anna.babinets.1/posts/3702314719993108>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/buf0s>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁹³ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 3 October 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/10/3/7309241/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁹⁴ Slidstvo, 13 October 2021. See <<https://tinyurl.com/4yf8mpw4>> or <<https://www.slidstvo.info/news/vyrishuvav-robochi-pytannya-slidstvo-info-pospilkuvalosya-z-sbushnykom-yakyj-namagavsya-zirvaty-pokaz-ofshoru-95/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁹⁵ International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 3 October 2021. See <<https://tinyurl.com/pux7heae>> or <<https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/global-investigation-tax-havens-offshore/>>.

eight episodes a year, each performed and recorded in front of a live theatre audience. The Kvartal 95 company was paid an amount equivalent to 40,000 USD per episode, which increased to 50,000 USD. Additionally, the Kvartal 95 company was paid a bonus equivalent to between 150,000 USD and 200,000 USD for each fully-booked live performance (which was nearly all of them).⁹⁶ So in a typical year, Kvartal could reasonably expect to bank around 1,500,000 USD from one TV series. This may seem small potatoes to western Europeans, but in 2005 (the year the first series of *Vecherniy Kvartal* appeared) one US dollar was usually worth about five Ukrainian hryvnia.

When the *Vecherniy Kvartal* show took off, Studio Kvartal 95 began to prosper in earnest. By December 2021 it had produced 10 feature films for theatrical release, four documentaries, 40 films for television, and 17 TV series.⁹⁷ According to official filings, the Kvartal 95 company's total estimated worth was 30 million USD, with an annual revenue of 52.6 million USD.⁹⁸

The offshore holdings of the Kvartal 95 members had been raised during the presidential election of 2019. In March that year, the Poroshenko-aligned People's Deputy Volodymyr Ariev published a statement asserting that Zelensky and his colleagues had a total of 41 million USD hidden in tax havens. Some of this money had originated from accounts held by Ukraine's PrivatBank, the financial institution that had almost collapsed in 2016 due to systemic fraud (discussed above). Ariev even identified some of the front companies through which the dubiously-acquired money had been routed, and specifically linked two of them directly to Zelensky. He didn't quite accuse Zelensky of colluding in fraud, theft, and money-laundering, but that was what Ariev's statements amounted to.⁹⁹

As the Pandora Papers revealed two years later, Ariev had been completely correct.¹⁰⁰ After 1+1 had signed the *Vecherniy Kvartal* show in 2012, money

⁹⁶ Derix and Shelkunova (see note 9) p. 56

⁹⁷ Derix and Shelkunova ((see note 9) p. 60

⁹⁸ Zelensky owned a 25 per cent stake in Kvartal 95, which he relinquished to Kvartal colleagues on taking office, and which he will therefore regain if and when he leaves the presidency.

⁹⁹ *Interfax Ukraine*, 4 March 2019.

See <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/570044.html>>.

¹⁰⁰ Given the specificity and accuracy of Ariev's statements, and bearing in mind the tight secrecy of international banking, the natural reading of the situation has to be that Ariev's information was obtained by one of Ukraine's intelligence agencies. The corollary is that Ariev was acting as a cut-out for President Poroshenko, who had been alerted to Kvartal 95's offshore arrangements and had decided to leak the intelligence material in order to damage his electoral opponent.

had begun to flow, out of Ukraine and into the comedy troupe's secret offshore accounts. At the centre of this network was a corporation called Maltex Multicapital. Based in the British Virgin Islands, Maltex was owned by a front company called Davegra (based in Cyprus). 25 per cent of the shares in Davegra (and thus in Maltex) were owned by a company called Film Heritage (based in Belize). Film Heritage was owned by Volodymyr Zelensky and his wife Olena.

A fortnight before the Ukrainian presidential election of March 2019, Zelensky had signed over Film Heritage's stake in Davegra (and thus Maltex) to Sergiy Shefir of Kvartal 95. Immediately after the election, as discussed above, Zelensky appointed Shefir his principal private aide. So Zelensky's Davegra holdings had never really left his personal control, and Shefir was acting as his sole unofficial trustee. When Zelensky passed his Davegra/Maltex holdings into Shefir's stewardship, Zelensky also quit his position at Film Heritage, leaving his wife Olena in charge of the company. Yet despite the fact that Film Heritage no longer held any shares in Davegra/Maltex, a legal agreement was drawn up and signed in which Film Heritage would still be paid shareholder dividends.

Questioned on a TV news programme about his use of offshore accounts, Zelensky said that such holding companies were commonly used by media workers during the 2010-2014 Yanukovych administration. He did not explain his continued use of such corporate vehicles long after Yanukovych had left office, nor why he had continued to gain advantages from them after entering office himself.

During Mr Yanukovych's time in office, all businesses were structured in this way, especially those related to the mass media. All channels had companies abroad, absolutely all of them. Because this was an opportunity for politics not to influence you. In Kvartal 95 there was satire, everyone was putting on pressure, everyone wanted to have influence. The tax inspectors came to us, if not daily, then at least weekly. And for such things this was part of the business structure of Kvartal 95 studio.¹⁰¹

Essentially, Zelensky's argument was that he had been politically persecuted into committing tax avoidance, and that it was insignificant anyway, because everyone else was at it, too. But shortly after Zelensky's protestations, his lifelong associate, Kvartal 95 scriptwriter Oleksandr Pikalov,¹⁰² told a reporter that he had never known about the offshore accounts set up by Zelensky and

¹⁰¹ *ICTV* (Ukraine), 15 October 2021; passage translated in Rudenko (see note 27) p. 106.

¹⁰² Born in 1976, two years before Zelensky, and in the same town (Kryvyi Rih).

colleagues in 2012. When asked, 'So no one told you anything about offshore?' Pikalov replied with an emphatic 'Absolutely'. When the interviewer asked: 'The sum of 40 million dollars appeared there [. . .] What could such an amount be for?' Pikalov added, 'I have no idea. I [was] doing my favourite thing, I am an artist, art director.'¹⁰³

So President Zelensky's ostentatious show of 'clean hands' on taking office was really a case of 'don't watch my hands'. His household's private income from the Davegra/Maltex pipeline did not dry up or disappear, it had just been diverted around Zelensky to his wife. Mrs Zelensky¹⁰⁴ has never stated how much her household receives through Film Heritage thanks to the March 2019 arrangement. Zelensky himself had not even declared his holdings in Maltex in 2018, when he announced his candidacy. Neither of the Zelenskys has ever faced any consequences for this deception. The day after the release of the Pandora Papers, Viktor Bobyrenko, of Ukrainian thinktank the Bureau of Policy Analysis, said he anticipated that Zelensky's public support would not be seriously damaged. Bobyrenko added that powerful Ukrainians with their own offshore secrets would tacitly collude in the suppression of the Pandora Papers story, saying: 'TV channels will not show this investigation, because it's about all the oligarchs.'¹⁰⁵

However, the mystery of Volodymyr Zelensky's income is far broader than this offshore obfuscation. In 2022, the Ukrainian edition of *Forbes* magazine estimated his total worth at approximately 20 million USD. Within 24 hours, *Forbes* had found reason to revise that upward to 'no more than' 30 million USD, citing *Forbes'* own belated discovery of several properties owned by Zelensky in the USA. It is not clear whether the *Forbes* estimate included Zelensky's offshore wealth. *Forbes* briefly made mention of an Italian villa sold by Zelensky in 2022 for 4 million EUR,¹⁰⁶ but did not discuss the rental income Zelensky derived from the property, approximately 50,000 EUR a month, which alone would bring him some 600,000 EUR a year.¹⁰⁷ The magazine also noted:

'[. . .]ash from [several property] sales was declared [by Zelensky] and is included in *Forbes's* estimate, but because the sum is less than

¹⁰³ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 25 October 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/10/25/7311555/>>.

¹⁰⁴ Sic. In Ukrainian, her surname would be given the feminine form Zelenska.

¹⁰⁵ *The Kyiv Post*, 4 October 2021. See <<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/6880>>.

¹⁰⁶ Using the average exchange rate for 2022, one US dollar was worth about 0.952 euros.

¹⁰⁷ *International Business Weekly*, 1 September 2022, <<https://tinyurl.com/bduhy3h9>> or <<https://internationalbusinessweekly.com/zelensky-rents-his-italian-villa-to-russians-for-50000-euros-while-urging-italy-to-not-take-russian-tourists/>>

the estimated value of the real estate, it is possible Zelensky remains a de facto beneficiary or the cash is invested elsewhere.¹⁰⁸

In other words, *Forbes* had admitted its own estimate of Zelensky's personal fortune was informed guesswork. It was also contextless guesswork. In the year of the *Forbes* story's publication, the US dollar averaged 32.6 Ukrainian hryvnia. Using only the upper *Forbes* estimate of 30m USD, Zelensky was indeed more or less a billionaire in Ukrainian terms, worth 979,000,000 UAH. Comparing like with like, *Forbes*'s estimate of Zelensky's personal wealth was what the average Ukrainian would earn in total if they worked non-stop for 5,490 years.¹⁰⁹

5: The Kleptocrat Supreme

Some 40 million USD had arrived in the offshore accounts of the Kwartal 95 troupe from companies controlled by Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky (born 1963).¹¹⁰ Kolomoisky, with a total fortune estimated at 1.39 billion USD, is one of an elite that grew extremely rich in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This sum may not seem so outlandish to westerners wearily familiar with the excesses of the ultra-rich. But in his homeland's currency, Kolomoisky's personal fortune is beyond the dreams of avarice. At the time of writing, 1.39 billion USD are worth roughly 40 billion UAH. Like their counterparts in Russia, the Ukrainian oligarchs were originally well-off businessmen, who snapped up state-run businesses very cheaply at a time when they were being privatised and the local currency was worth almost nothing.¹¹¹ In the process, they deprived the state of a fair price for its own assets, and stopped the general public from participating in the new economic reality. And of course, as the post-Soviet economies gradually stabilised, the new owners of the former state corporations became obscenely wealthy.

In this chaotic period of robber-barons and their daylight robberies, the most ruthless operators were the most successful. And Kolomoisky is an extraordinarily ruthless man, noted for his cruelty.¹¹² He enjoys intimidating

¹⁰⁸ *Forbes*, 20 April 2022. See <<https://tinyurl.com/36dpz3bm>> or <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattdurot/2022/04/20/president-zelensky-is-not-a-billionaire-so-how-much-is-he-worth/>>.

¹⁰⁹ In 2022, the average Ukrainian's monthly pay was 14,859 UAH.

¹¹⁰ Again, this substantiates the claims made in March 2019 by People's Deputy Volodymyr Arieiev, discussed above.

¹¹¹ Ukraine retained its Soviet-era currency until the modern Hryvnia was introduced in 1996.

¹¹² Rudenko (see note 27) p. 104

visitors to his vast executive office, by silently pressing a button on his desk to drop crayfish into his wall-length aquarium of sharks.¹¹³ He is also cynical to the point of nihilism. When Ukraine outlawed the holding of dual nationalities, Kolomoisky declared himself above the law because he had three nationalities, not two, and held three passports: Ukrainian; Cypriot; and Israeli.¹¹⁴ And it seemed the authorities agreed, because no action was ever taken against him.

The Ukrainian state oil company Ukrnafta had been founded by the Soviet government in 1945. When Ukrnafta was privatised in 1994, Kolomoisky's multinational conglomerate Privat Group bought 42 per cent of the shares. Ukrainian law required a 60 per cent shareholder attendance for company meetings to be quorate. Kolomoisky's 42 per cent enabled him to veto decisions and effectively control the whole company. In March 2015, a group of reformist People's Deputies in Ukraine's parliament managed to pass a law altering the rules about corporate quorums, so that now a simple majority of shareholders was required to make decisions at meetings. This removed Kolomoisky's power to dictate company decisions. In response, Kolomoisky sent armed men in military vehicles to surround and barricade Ukrnafta's corporate headquarters in Kyiv, saying that the deployment was 'to protect the company from an illegal takeover'.

Kolomoisky's access to hired thugs was not surprising, given that the billionaire has had a hand in building and supporting Ukrainian paramilitary forces since at least the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Kolomoisky sank what were, in Ukrainian terms, vast sums into training and equipping these groups: tens of millions of US dollars per year, which transformed what had been disorganised street gangs and football hooligans into disciplined domestic mercenaries. Among the early recipients of Kolomoisky's largesse were three groups that later became infamous as the Aidar unit,¹¹⁵ the Dnipro-1 regiment,¹¹⁶ and the Azov battalion.¹¹⁷ All three private military groups were later absorbed into the armed forces of Ukraine, despite their

¹¹³ *Wall Street Journal*, 27 June 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/49b8w8k7>> or <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-secret-weapon-feisty-oligarch-ihor-kolomoisky-1403886665>>.

¹¹⁴ *Radio Svoboda*, 20 March 2015. See <<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-kolomoisky-rfe-journalist/26912164.html>>.

¹¹⁵ Amnesty International, 8 September 2014. See <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/040/2014/en/>>.

¹¹⁶ *The Daily Beast*, 12 June 2014. See <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-town-determined-to-stop-putin>>.

¹¹⁷ *Reuters*, 5 May 2015. See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUS60927080220150505>>.

established histories of terrorising and brutalising Ukrainian civilians.¹¹⁸ While he was fostering these dangerous fanatics, Kolomoisky also curried favour with the Ukrainian government more directly, by offering bounties of \$10,000 for the capture of pro-Russian separatists inside Ukraine.¹¹⁹

Kolomoisky had strengthened and augmented Ukraine's ramshackle military with new soldiers, at a time when the country was both seriously-impooverished and facing increasing Russian aggression. But Kolomoisky's generosity was of course an investment. In March 2014, as a result of ingratiating himself with Poroshenko's predecessor,¹²⁰ Kolomoisky had been appointed governor of the industrial Dnipropetrovsk oblast in Ukraine's south-east midlands. But after Kolomoisky sent his mobsters to Ukrnafta headquarters in 2015, Poroshenko forced Kolomoisky to resign his governorship. Tacitly acknowledging that Kolomoisky's political power had become a threat to his own, Poroshenko said: 'We will not have any governor with their own pocket army.'¹²¹

After this debacle, Kolomoisky became implacably hostile to Poroshenko. A few months after being stripped of his direct political power, Kolomoisky

¹¹⁸ Kolomoisky's nurturing of the neo-Nazi Azov battalion is of a piece with his extreme cynicism. Kolomoisky is Jewish, but for historical reasons Nazism is not as loathed in Ukraine as it is in most other countries. Since a neo-Nazi organisation would be very attractive to the hardened criminals Kolomoisky wanted to recruit, the rewards he stood to gain by building a neo-Nazi fighting force must have outweighed the obvious ethical dilemma presented by doing so.

¹¹⁹ Kolomoisky's strange associations with semi-organised crime may pre-date his paramilitary interests. In 2003 a Dnipropetrovsk-based lawyer was attacked by a pair of strangers, who repeatedly stabbed him and beat him with an iron bar. The lawyer survived, and later stated that, prior to the attack, Kolomoisky had threatened him. The lawyer's assailants were eventually identified as associates of Serhiy Nikitin, who was one of Kolomoisky's bodyguards. In 2005, Nikitin's body was found floating in the Dnipro river, with 10 stab wounds. The low-level gangster who had purportedly murdered Nikitin was then also found murdered, in what was later proved to be a staged suicide. The serving prosecutor-general at the time opened a case on Kolomoisky in relation to the murder of Serhiy Nikitin, but found insufficient evidence to proceed.

On the other hand, Kolomoisky has openly threatened the President of Georgia, telling one journalist during an on-the-record interview: 'If I ever catch sight of him, I tell you, I will smash his face in. As soon as he leaves his post, I'll beat him up and down like a dog.' *Politico*, 21 December 2015. See <<https://www.politico.eu/article/star-wars-in-ukraine-poroshenko-vs-kolomoisky/>>.

¹²⁰ Oleksandr Turchynov, who became interim president when Viktor Yanukovych was ousted and fled to Russia in February 2014. A new presidential election was then scheduled for May the same year, and Turchynov chose not to stand as a candidate.

¹²¹ *Financial Times*, 23 March 2015. See <<https://www.ft.com/content/c4fda6b4-d184-11e4-ad3a-00144feab7de>>.

registered a new political party called UKROP (short for Ukrayins'ke Obb'yednannya Patriotiv; in English: Ukrainian Union of Patriots).¹²² It was Kolomoisky's formal consolidation of an informal far-right parliamentary voting alliance of that name. This informal 'UKROP' bloc had included People's Deputies Boryslav Bereza (former spokesman for the ultranationalist party, Right Sector) and Andriy Biletsky (the neo-Nazi founder of what became, with Kolomoisky's generous assistance, the Azov battalion), both of whom immediately signed up to Kolomoisky's new and well-funded (but as it turned out, short-lived) party. The formalised UKROP didn't enjoy electoral success. The party gradually shrank until it had just one elected representative, at local council level. UKROP's former director of communications, Yevheniya Kravchuk, went on to join the Zelenskyite Servant of the People Party in 2019, and was elected to parliament as a People's Deputy.

In Kolomoisky's view, President Poroshenko had broken the unwritten rules of governance. Power in Ukraine comprises its democratic processes and state institutions, and the private wealth of the oligarchs, a combination known as *systema* (literally: The System). Rather like the 'establishment' in the United Kingdom, the *systema* in Ukraine is not monolithic, and its boundaries are neither rigid nor clearly-demarcated. Oligarchs influence politicians, as Kolomoisky did, and can even outright 'buy' them (which Kolomoisky also did), but politicians can also be oligarchs, as Poroshenko himself was.¹²³ The shared concern of the oligarchs and the politicians was their undeservedly luxurious lifestyles, which they maintained by influencing and manipulating the impoverished Ukrainian public.

Many of Ukraine's oligarchs own TV stations and other media, since an estimated 60 per cent of Ukrainians rely on TV news and current affairs programmes as their primary source of information.¹²⁴ Such outlets give the

¹²² *Korrespondent.net*, 18 June 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yr2rd8j3>> or <<https://ua.korrespondent.net/ukraine/3529272-minuist-zareiestruvav-partiui-kolomoiskoho>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹²³ Poroshenko owned (and still owns) the Roshen confectionery company, which at the time of his election was the 20th biggest sweet company on the planet, generating annual profits in excess of 1 billion USD. Poroshenko (nicknamed by Ukrainians 'The Chocolate King') had promised to sell it if elected. He then reneged on that pledge and claimed it hadn't been possible to arrange a buyer. When this didn't calm popular discontent, Poroshenko belatedly transferred his Roshen holdings into a blind trust, which enabled him to regain full control of his corporate empire after leaving office. See <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/242444.html>> and <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/397675.html>>.

¹²⁴ E.g. Petro Poroshenko owned the Ukrainian TV station Channel 5, before, during, and after his presidency. He eventually sold it in 2021.

sub-political wing of the oligarchy the power to shape public opinion and (directly or indirectly) pressurise elected politicians, Among his numerous business holdings, Ihor Kolomoisky is the de facto owner of the most popular TV station in Ukraine, Channel 1+1, because he holds a commanding 70 per cent of shares in its parent company, 1+1 Media Group. It was Channel 1+1 that in 2012 bought the broadcasting rights to the *Vercherniy Kvartal* show, and later (from 2015 to 2019) produced and broadcast the *Servant of the People* sitcom-cum-psyop.

Zelensky has mostly evaded questions about his ties with Kolomoisky, but in January 2019 he was ambushed mid-interview when a journalist from *Ukrainian Pravda* asked him to describe his relationship with the oligarch. Zelensky's reply was a flat denial: 'No relationship.' The reporter followed up with 'Are you friends?' Zelensky dug himself a bit deeper by stating: 'Look, we're not friends', which enabled the reporter to play his ace by saying: 'You were at [Kolomoisky's] birthday party last year. You are constantly talking to him.'¹²⁵ At that point Zelensky immediately abandoned his 'No relationship' lie, and instead bluffed: 'So what? We are working [. . .] it's just a workflow.'¹²⁶

Despite Zelensky's evasive bluster, Kolomoisky's handiwork can be seen from the very start of what could be called the 'Servant of the People project'.¹²⁷ Andriy Bohdan, who became Zelensky's 'de facto vice-president',¹²⁸ was not only a lawyer for Kolomoisky's 1+1 TV station, he was a personal lawyer to Kolomoisky himself. Bohdan had first started working for Kolomoisky in 2014, during the oligarch's brief stint as governor of Dnipropetrovsk.¹²⁹

Kolomoisky had been forced to resign from his position as governor of Dnipropetrovsk in the Spring of 2015, and so had lost a direct role in politics. UKROP, the party launched by Kolomoisky in the Summer of 2015,¹³⁰ was openly opposed to President Poroshenko, but fizzled out. It was in the Autumn

¹²⁵ Zelensky was one of approximately 100 Kolomoisky cronies in attendance at the Lake Geneva celebration, which cost a total of 23,000 Swiss Francs (then around 17,000 GBP). *Radio Svoboda*, 13 April 2018. See <<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-schemes/29163702.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹²⁶ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 21 January 2019. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2019/01/21/7204341/>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹²⁷ Encompassing, in chronological order: the TV series, Zelensky's election to the presidency and his party's majority in parliament.

¹²⁸ Discussed on p. 13 above.

¹²⁹ *Reuters*, 22 April 2019. See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-election-team-idUSKCN1RY0XF>>.

¹³⁰ Discussed on pp. 32 and 33 above.

of 2015, when the first series of *Servant of the People* was shown on Kolomoisky's Channel 1+1, that Bohdan started badgering Zelensky to stand against Poroshenko at the 2019 presidential election. In the run-up to the 2019 election, Kolomoisky also lent his endorsement to Poroshenko's main rival, former Ukrainian prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko. It seems that Kolomoisky lighted upon Zelensky as another potential 'Trojan horse'. The object of all these exercises was getting rid of Poroshenko. Replacing him with Tymoshenko would be good, but replacing him with Zelensky would be even better.

The look of the Kolomoisky-Bohdan-Zelensky relationship, therefore, is that Bohdan was acting as Kolomoisky's cut-out, steering Zelensky's decision-making while insulating the billionaire from accusations of direct involvement. Bohdan had no motive for pressuring Zelensky into running for president, but Kolomoisky did. Bohdan stood to gain little from a Zelensky presidency, but Kolomoisky did. Bohdan could not have guaranteed Zelensky unstinting and positive coverage on a national TV station, but Kolomoisky could – and obviously did.

The extent to which Zelensky's accession to the presidency was enabled by Kolomoisky's media power is perhaps best illustrated by the circumstances surrounding a single incident. When Zelensky upstaged Poroshenko with a televised announcement on New Year's Eve 2018,¹³¹ it was dismissed by Zelensky as a technical error. He described that 'technical error' as follows: (1) he had pre-recorded a speech, and then (2) handed the recording (a physical analogue videotape) to someone at Channel 1+1. Unidentified malefactors at 1+1 then (3) supposedly neglected to check the running time of Zelensky's recorded speech. Zelensky's version of events would mean that nobody at 1+1 even bothered to watch his speech to see if it needed editing. In fact, Zelensky seriously expected people to believe that his tape managed to bypass all standard TV production processes, and go straight to transmission.

Channel 1+1 has never issued any explanation for this exceedingly unlikely accident, and no employee was ever disciplined or dismissed for it either. Only a handful of executives had the authority to hijack the station's broadcast output like that, and then also ensure there were no consequences. One of them was Ihor Kolomoisky, and all the others were his direct subordinates.¹³²

At some point between December 2016 and January 2017, Kolomoisky left Ukraine on a seemingly-permanent basis, and went to live in Geneva,

¹³¹ See p. 4 above.

¹³² The title, *Servant of the People*, was the intellectual property of Kolomoisky's Channel 1+1, but no action was ever taken against the political party that appropriated that title.

Switzerland. Beginning in February 2017,¹³³ Andriy Bohdan and Zelensky made frequent trips to Geneva together. These Swiss stopovers continued until at least June 2018,¹³⁴ which was just before the publicity campaign began for the third series of the *Servant of the People* sitcom.¹³⁵ In September 2018, Kolomoisky moved from Switzerland to Tel Aviv, Israel. Bohdan and Zelensky then made three known joint visits to Tel Aviv in quick succession, during October, November, and December 2018.

Neither Bohdan nor Zelensky has ever disclosed the purpose of these visits, but they were obviously meetings with Kolomoisky (who has never commented on the visits at all). The unavoidable inference is that these tripartite meetings involved some ongoing concern, because they took place so often, and were considered so sensitive that long-distance telecommunications could not be trusted. By contrast, on 16 May 2019, Kolomoisky felt safe to return to Ukraine for the first time in two years, landing at Dnipro International Airport in the middle of the night, aboard one of his company jets. The inauguration of Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine, took place in Kyiv four days later.¹³⁶

US Ambassador William Taylor, *chargé d'affaires* at the Kyiv Embassy, spoke repeatedly to President Zelensky about Kolomoisky's influence, which obviously reflected unease within the US Department of State. Taylor later recalled:

The influence of one particular oligarch over Mr. Zelensky is of particular concern, and that's this fellow Kolomoisky, so – and Kolomoisky has growing influence. And this is one of the concerns that I have expressed to President Zelensky and his team on several occasions very explicitly, saying that, you know, Mr. President, Kolomoisky was not elected. You were elected and he, Mr. Kolomoisky, is increasing his influence in your government, which could cause you to fail. So I've had that

¹³³ The second series of the *Servant of the People* sitcom was broadcast on Channel 1+1 from October to November that year.

¹³⁴ *Kyiv Post*, 19 April 2019. See <<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/6912>>. One of these visits (a flight that took place on 13 February 2018) was to attend Kolomoisky's 55th birthday celebrations, mentioned in footnote 125 above.

¹³⁵ See p. 8 above.

¹³⁶ *Kyiv Post*, 16 May 2019. See <<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/10759>>. After the inauguration, Kolomoisky had the word 'Zelensky' engraved on a keyring fob, and would play with it in his fingers in front of other people, silently hinting at his own private access to political power. Rudenko (see note 27) p. 110.

conversation with him a couple of times. ¹³⁷

Although Kolomoisky has never explained his decision to leave Ukraine at around the New Year period of 2016-2017, it is widely presumed that he was attempting to evade arrest in connection with the PrivatBank scandal. PrivatBank was the financial institution whose near-collapse in December 2016¹³⁸ was caused by protracted and systemic fraud, a criminal enterprise in which Kolomoisky himself was and remains a prime suspect because Kolomoisky¹³⁹ had in fact owned PrivatBank.

When the PrivatBank heist was examined by independent forensic auditors, it transpired that people working within PrivatBank had behaved as a 'bank within a bank' for 10 years prior to its emergency nationalisation, and had ruthlessly exploited a loophole in Ukrainian finance regulations. Huge sums of money had been transferred from PrivatBank in Ukraine to a subsidiary branch registered and located in Cyprus. Ukrainian regulators regarded that subsidiary branch as a Ukrainian entity, meaning that PrivatBank money held in Cyprus had never officially left Ukraine. This one-on-one legal identification of PrivatBank's Ukrainian and Cypriot branches also meant the money did not go through the international SWIFT network,¹⁴⁰ thus avoiding a tripwire that could have set off alarm bells. Simultaneously, Cypriot law identified the Ukrainian PrivatBank and its Cyprus branch as separate legal entities. Without the ability to scrutinise the affairs of the Ukrainian parent company, Cypriot authorities did not detect anything obviously untoward about the cash flowing from the former to the latter. When the money arrived at PrivatBank's branch in Cyprus, it was transferred into Cypriot accounts held by corporate entities based neither in Ukraine nor in Cyprus, and effectively disappeared.

This decade-long thievery was camouflaged by the continuous cycling and re-routing through PrivatBank of loans and repayments involving a vast and co-ordinated network of front companies. Some of the loans were issued at artificially low rates, and then used to buy and sell property at profit that greatly exceeded the loan's interest. Other loans were used to pay off vastly-inflated bills arising from bogus contracts between separate front companies, and were then used to repay the payees' loans, allowing PrivatBank to

¹³⁷ US Congress; House of Representatives; Oversight and Accountability Committee, 2 December 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yy7w5xwz>> or <<https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-12-02-Report-of-Evidence-in-the-Democrats-Impeachment-Inquiry-in-the-House-of-Representatives.pdf>> p. 34.

¹³⁸ Discussed on pp. 17 and 18 above.

¹³⁹ Along with a business partner, the lesser-known Ukrainian oligarch Gennadiy Bogolyubov.

¹⁴⁰ The acronym of the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication.

maintain fictitious balances that far exceeded what it held on deposit at any given time. The web of transactions was so complex and convoluted that later investigators decided it must have been designed by a computer algorithm rather than by human beings. Many, if not most, of the corporate entities that received the pilfered PrivatBank money in their Cyprus-held accounts were created and registered in countries regarded as offshore tax havens, putting them beyond the reach of official inquiry.¹⁴¹

The Ukraine-to-Cyprus cascade was what Prosecutor-General Ruslan Ryaboshapka would have traced, if his investigation into PrivatBank hadn't been obstructed by SBU chief Ivan Bakanov and then halted by Bakanov's lifelong friend Volodymyr Zelensky.¹⁴² In addition, Zelensky's finance minister Oleksandr Danyliuk had resigned in September 2019 because Zelensky was seriously contemplating a re-privatisation of PrivatBank, which would have effectively thrown away the money the state had pumped into keeping the bank solvent in 2016. Danyliuk later stated that when he voiced his immovable opposition to this alarming idea, he had been edged out by Andriy Bohdan, and that Zelensky had acquiesced in this.¹⁴³

Even the leaked Pandora Papers, which were published the year after Ryaboshapka's dismissal, didn't illuminate the route by which the PrivatBank money had flowed out of Ukraine. But a year after the publication of the Pandora Papers, a separate set of leaks exposed the fact that Kolomoisky directly and indirectly held sums equivalent to billions of US dollars in secret bank accounts in Switzerland, a country globally renowned for its draconian financial privacy laws.

The leaked documents belonged to the international Credit Suisse bank, headquartered in Zurich. During the period covered by the leaked records, Kolomoisky's personal account contained 27 million Swiss francs (29.4 million USD). An account in the names of his mother, wife and daughter held just over three billion francs (3.2 billion USD). The total was equivalent to approximately 60 per cent of the money that disappeared from Kolomoisky's PrivatBank in Ukraine. Furthermore, the most recent documents in the Credit Suisse leaks dated from 2010, which meant they partially overlapped the period when the

¹⁴¹ *Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 19 April 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/s3wnr58x>> or <<https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/oligarchs-weaponized-cyprus-eranch-of-ukraines-largest-bank-to-send-5-billion-abroad>>.

¹⁴² See p. 18 above.

¹⁴³ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 155. Bohdan had personally represented Kolomoisky in the latter's attempts to wrest back control of Privatbank, after it had been nationalised by the Ukrainian government. *Reuters*, 21 May 2019. See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-zelenskiy-bogdan-idUKKCN1SR20Y>>.

PrivatBank fraud took place.¹⁴⁴ Speaking after his accounts were revealed in the Credit Suisse leaks, Kolomoisky told reporters that his Swiss money had come from the sale of some of his industrial assets around the world. He added that at some unspecified point after 2010, he had transferred all the money out of Credit Suisse, and into the Cyprus branch of PrivatBank.¹⁴⁵ If the latter statement was true, and not a cruel joke, then Kolomoisky's billions certainly never found their way back to Ukraine.

6: Little Vova and Dyad'ko Sam

On 5 March 2021 Ihor Kolomoisky was banned from entering the United States. President Joe Biden had taken office in January that year, succeeding the calamitous presidency of Donald Trump. Biden's Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, announced:

In his official capacity as a Governor of Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk Oblast from 2014 to 2015, Kolomoisky was involved in corrupt acts that undermined the rule of law and the Ukrainian public's faith in their government's democratic institutions and public processes, including using his political influence and official power for his personal benefit.

Blinken added:

Kolomoisky's current and ongoing efforts to undermine Ukraine's democratic processes and institutions [. . .] pose a serious threat to its future.¹⁴⁶

This was a rather performative measure, since Kolomoisky seldom visited America anyway. It was also notable for what it did not say. The avowed concern of the Department of State in March 2021 was supposedly Kolomoisky's conduct during the years 2014 and 2015. All of Kolomoisky's numerous subversive activities after his Dnipropetrovsk governorship had ended were hidden under Blinken's vague reference to 'serious and ongoing efforts'. For example, Blinken's announcement didn't relate to Kolomoisky's role in the huge PrivatBank fraud, which had already been going on for a decade by

¹⁴⁴ As discussed above, independent forensic auditors determined that the PrivatBank fraud had spanned the 10 years before the bank was eventually nationalised in 2016.

¹⁴⁵ *Slidstvo*, 21 February 2022. See <<https://tinyurl.com/34ppymjy>> or <<https://www.slidstvo.info/articles/suissesecrets-ukrayinski-posadovtsi-ta-biznesmeny-u-novomu-vytoku-dokumentiv/>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹⁴⁶ US Department of State, 5 March 2021. See <<https://tinyurl.com/murvc7c4>> or <<https://www.state.gov/public-designation-of-oligarch-and-former-ukrainian-public-official-ihor-kolomoysky-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption>>.

the time it came to light in 2016. The US Department of State's precision concerning the dates and places of Kolomoisky's 'corrupt acts' sits very uncomfortably with its vagueness about what those corrupt acts actually were.

What Kolomoisky definitely had done during that period was pump money, training, and weaponry into disorganised gangs of thugs and hoodlums thugs that went on to become far-right units of the Ukrainian military.¹⁴⁷ Behind Secretary Blinken's mealy-mouthed anathema was a growing alarm among some in the US political establishment about the increasing risk of 'blowback' from the links forged between far-right extremists in Ukraine and in America. This selfish concern had gone from negligible to acute during the 2016-2020 administration of the Republican populist President Trump, who had emboldened far-right 'deplorables', chiefly by his refusal to condemn them. As the end of 2019 approached, and the 2020 presidential election loomed, the Democratic Party-controlled House of Representatives had become a megaphone for denouncing what had already been going on for years. On 10 September 2019, the House Committee on Homeland Security heard that 'in 2018 violent white supremacist extremists were responsible for three times as many deaths in the United States as were Islamists' and that:

Just as jihadists have used conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, the Balkans, Iraq, and Syria to swap tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and solidify transnational networks, so too are WSEs¹⁴⁸ using Ukraine as a hub or battlefield laboratory, where an estimated 17,000 people from over fifty countries has [sic] traveled to actively participate in the ongoing conflict.¹⁴⁹

In particular, the committee learned that: '[Ukraine's] Azov Battalion has [. . .] cultivated a relationship with members of the Atomwaffen Division¹⁵⁰ as well as with U.S.-based militants from the Rise Above Movement, or RAM, which the FBI has labelled a 'white supremacy extremist group' based in Southern California. A week later, a Homeland Security subcommittee was told:.

Azov reportedly has connections to the U.S.-based white supremacist group Rise Above Movement, whose members travelled in 2018 on a European tour to include a visit to Ukraine to meet key figures of the

¹⁴⁷ See p. 31 above.

¹⁴⁸ White Supremacist Extremists

¹⁴⁹ House Committee on Homeland Security; US House of Representatives, 10 September 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mrsujwxt>> or <<https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109886/witnesses/HHRG-116-HM00-Wstate-SoufanA-20190910.pdf>>.

¹⁵⁰ A neo-Nazi terrorist organisation founded in the US in 2013.

Azov movement.¹⁵¹

The growing consternation in the US Congress did not go unnoticed in Ukraine. At the end of October, 38 members of the Ukrainian parliament signed an open letter to key members of the US Congress, entitled 'MPs civilly request U.S. officials to exercise restraint and adopt measured approach in their statements with respect to "Azov Battalion".' Of the letter's 38 signatories, 20 were People's Deputies from Zelensky's Servant of the People Party. Among them were Iryna Venediktova (who would soon be appointed Zelensky's prosecutor-general) and Oleksandr Tkachenko (who, before his election to parliament, had been director-general of Ihor Kolomoisky's TV station, Channel 1+1).¹⁵² Their letter included the following memorable and highly-manipulative plea:

Needless to say, the attempts to label one of the most decorated official units of the National Guard of Ukraine a 'terrorist organization' or an 'overseas violent white supremacist extremist group' weigh heavily on our souls and painfully echo in the hearts of the Ukrainian servicemen, veterans and volunteers who have taken part in the war in the Donbas and continue to *defend Ukraine from the Russian aggression*. (Emphasis supplied.)¹⁵³

The letter's aggrieved tone was not all that surprising given that, prior to the Trump presidency, the USA's political elite had been encouraging Ukrainian fascists and neo-Nazis for several years. In December 2013, during the early stages of the Euromaidan,¹⁵⁴ Republican US Senator John McCain visited Ukraine to address the protests against the pro-Russian President Yanukovich. McCain was really following Theodore Roosevelt's famous advice to 'Speak softly and carry a big stick'. From a stage erected in central Kyiv, Senator McCain said there would be 'sanctions' against Ukraine if President Yanukovich's recalcitrance continued, and threatened 'concrete action' if the authorities sought to suppress popular discontent.

McCain told the assembled crowds: 'We are here to support your just cause, the sovereign right of Ukraine to determine its own destiny freely and

¹⁵¹ Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism, House Committee on Homeland Security, US House of Representatives, 18 September 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mr2bstuc>> or <<https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109964/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA13-Wstate-NazarianS-20190918.pdf>>.

¹⁵² Non-Zelenskyite signatories included Valentyn Nalyvaichenko and Andriy Kozhemiakin, respectively former chief and former deputy chief of Ukraine's security service, the SBU.

¹⁵³ Information Department of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 31 October 2019. See <<https://www.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/183790.html>>.

¹⁵⁴ See footnote 9 above.

independently. And the destiny you seek lies in Europe.¹⁵⁵ Standing beside McCain was a scowling man who was virtually known outside Ukraine. He was Oleg Tyahnybok, a far-right politician from a neo-Nazi background.¹⁵⁶ At the time, Tyahnybok was the leader of the Svoboda Party, which was the 2004 'rebranding' of the country's Social Nationalist Party, a thinly-disguised neo-Nazi front organisation.¹⁵⁷ It was the Social Nationalist Party that had re-introduced the infamous 'Wolfsangel' rune to modern Ukrainian iconography, by adopting it as their party symbol and claiming it was a combination of the letters I and N, short for for *Ideya Natsiyi* – 'The Idea of the Nation'.¹⁵⁸ In 2012, Tyahnybok had been listed by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre as one of the ten most dangerous anti-semites in the world.¹⁵⁹ But from a US perspective in 2013, Tyahnybok had the redeeming feature of being both vehemently anti-Russia and enthusiastically pro-NATO. The east and north-east of Ukraine has a land border with Russia nearly 2,000 km long.

In practice, John McCain's Kyiv speech put Yanukovich in a terminal dilemma. If he continued to seek rapprochement with Russia, then the Ukrainian economy would be wrecked and his administration was doomed; and if he couldn't stop the Euromaidan demonstrations from escalating, then his administration was still doomed anyway. From within the capital city of Ukraine, an American politician had dictated the terms of Yanukovich's surrender. Yanukovich held out until 22 February 2014 before admitting defeat and fleeing to Russia. Within five days, Russia invaded Ukraine's peninsula, Crimea.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ *NBC News*, 16 December 2013. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yck3jbam>> or <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraine-protests-mccain-warns-us-could-act-over-russia-deal-flna2d11744439>>.

¹⁵⁶ *FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting)*, 29 August 2018. See <<https://tinyurl.com/y8bz772v>> or <<https://fair.org/home/john-mccain-human-rights-ukrainian-nazi-photo-washington-post/>>.

¹⁵⁷ The Ukrainian word 'Svoboda' means 'Freedom'. The Svoboda Party is not connected to Radio Svoboda, a US-funded broadcaster.

¹⁵⁸ Azov Battalion founder Andriy Biletsky later used the same flimsy alibi, when the Wolfsangel was adopted as the new unit's regimental emblem.

¹⁵⁹ *The Jerusalem Post*, 28 December 2012. See <<https://tinyurl.com/245dmd6z>> or <<https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/Wiesenthal-ranks-top-10-anti-Semites-Israel-haters>>.

¹⁶⁰ In the final days of his administration, President Yanukovich had reached a compromise with the Euromaidan demands, and had informally agreed to hold an early presidential election in 2014. This olive branch proved insufficient to stop Yanukovich's downfall. *Interfax Ukraine*, 21 February 2014. See <<http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/191667.html>>.

The presence in Kyiv of Senator John McCain in December 2013, was, in itself, a form of US involvement. McCain was not in government, and nor was his political party, since the US President in 2013 and 2014 was the Democratic Party's Barack Obama. Yet, no-one from the US government spoke out to correct McCain and rule out the possibility of US intervention.

On 20 November 2013, a month before John McCain appeared in Kyiv with Tyahnybok, Ukraine's parliament had heard that the US was planning a coup and civil war in the country.¹⁶¹ People's Deputy Oleg Tsaryov had told his fellow lawmakers that US Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt had allowed the US Embassy in Kyiv to be used by an American NGO called TechCamp, between 14 and 15 November that year.¹⁶² Tsaryov told parliament that TechCamp was training social media activists to agitate and then coordinate civil unrest. Tsaryov described how during the TechCamp training sessions:

American instructors explained how social networks and internet technologies can be used for targeted manipulation of public opinion, as well as to activate protest potential . . . provoke violent unrest on the territory of Ukraine, radicalisation of the population, and triggering of infight [sic]. American instructors show examples of successful use of social networks used to organise protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.¹⁶³

The day after Tsaryov's parliamentary revelations, the Euromaidan began.¹⁶⁴ The prime mover was Mustafa Nayem, a former People's Deputy of the Ukrainian parliament, who on 21 November 2013 posted a Facebook message that instructed his fellow anti-Yanukovych citizens: 'We will meet at 10:30 pm under the Independence Monument.'¹⁶⁵ Dress warmly, take umbrellas, tea,

¹⁶¹ *Interfax Ukraine*, 20 November 2013. See <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/175839.html>>

¹⁶² TechCamp was not, as Tsaryov alleged, an NGO. It is a information technology 'outreach' programme, and in 2013 it was run by an agency of the US Department of State. TechCamp itself acknowledges only one training event in Ukraine, and it took place in 2015. (Interactive map of TechCamp events, accessed via <<https://techcamp.america.gov/about/>>.

¹⁶³ Quoted from video excerpt, originally broadcast live on 20 November 2011 by the official TV channel of the Ukrainian parliament (RADA TV) and uploaded to YouTube with English-language subtitles on 27 January 2015. See <<https://youtu.be/y9hOI8TuBUM>>.

¹⁶⁴ Tsaryov would later fall foul of the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who was appointed governor of Dnipropetrovsk in the immediate post-Maidan month of March 2014. Tsaryov was a pro-Russian separatist, and Kolomoisky offered a 500,000 USD bounty for his capture. In a bugged phone conversation that was later leaked to Ukrainian media, Kolomoisky also made a veiled threat to kill Tsaryov, couching it as a warning that Jewish business leaders had offered a million USD for Tsaryov's assassination. *Wall Street Journal*, 27 June 2014 (see note 113 above).

¹⁶⁵ A 200-ft triumphal column situated in central Kyiv.

coffee, good mood and friends. Reposting [of this message] is welcome in every way!¹⁶⁶ Within three hours, Nayem's post had been shared 1,000 times by Facebook users, and by midnight some 3,000 demonstrators had assembled in central Kyiv. In the seven-day period after Nayem's post, the Twitter hashtag #EuroMaidan was used somewhere between 1,500 and 3,000 times every hour. By 13 December, the EuroMaidan's quasi-official Facebook page had 102,000 subscribers.¹⁶⁷ Throughout this initial phase of the Maidan, Mustafa Nayem was in behind-the-scenes communication with another Ukrainian journalist, Sergii Leshchenko, who was in Washington DC, on a fellowship with the National Endowment for Democracy. Leshchenko watched events in Kyiv unfold via online streaming, and 'inundated Nayem with questions'. When President Yanukovich finally flew out of Ukraine on 22 February 2014, Leshchenko immediately flew in and filed a report on the president's opulent freshly abandoned residence.¹⁶⁸

New York University researchers monitoring the Euromaidan online observed a high degree of coordination, remarking that: '[O]ur data suggests that Ukrainian social media users are strategically using the tools available to them in the ways that seem most effective.' The coordination included the online publication of maps showing where to receive free food and drink, as well as rolling updates on the movements of the police, which helped the protesters to avoid arrest.¹⁶⁹ Nyam's use of social media to trigger civil unrest invites comparisons with Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who on 25 January 2011 made a public call to action via Facebook, and kicked off the Egyptian revolution of the so-called 'Arab Spring'.

The hidden hand of Geoffrey Pyatt, the US Ambassador named by Tsaryov, was exposed again in February 2014, as the Euromaidan approached its climax. A recording of an intercepted telephone call was published online,¹⁷⁰ which showed Ambassador Pyatt in conversation with Victoria Nuland of the US

¹⁶⁶ *Obozrevatel*, author profile (undated). See <<https://www.obozrevatel.com/ukr/person/2401.htm>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹⁶⁷ *Kyiv Post*, 13 December 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2zanwruf>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/euromaidan/role-of-social-media-in-euromaidan-movement-essential-332749.html>>.

¹⁶⁸ *The New Yorker*, 29 August 2016. See <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/05/reforming-ukraine-after-maidan>>.

¹⁶⁹ *Washington Post*, 4 December 2013. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2nz9ejhm>> or <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2013/12/04/strategic-use-of-facebook-and-twitter-in-ukrainian-protests/>>.

¹⁷⁰ *BBC News*, 7 February 2014. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>>.

Department of State.¹⁷¹ The telephone conversation had taken place on 4 February 2014, and Nuland and Pyatt were discussing the composition of the new government that would be formed when Yanukovich relinquished power. Pyatt told Nuland:

'I'm just thinking in terms of sort of the process moving ahead we want to keep the moderate democrats together. The problem is going to be Tyahnybok and his guys [. . .]'

Nuland replied:

I think Yats¹⁷² is the guy who's got the economic experience, the governing experience. He's the . . . what he needs is Klitsch¹⁷³ and Tyahnybok on the outside. He needs to be talking to them four times a week, you know.

'Tyahnybok' was Oleg Tyahnybok, the Ukrainian crypto-Nazi photographed alongside US Senator John McCain in December 2013. Victoria Nuland was already familiar with Tyahnybok: weeks before Tyahnybok and McCain shared a stage, Nuland and Tyahnybok had been photographed together during a face-to-face meeting.¹⁷⁴ It goes without saying that her Department of State advisors had already briefed Nuland on who she was meeting.

The manoeuvrings of Nuland and Pyatt therefore entailed Tyahnybok (as leader of Svoboda, an official opposition party) having covert access to, and influence over, the US-installed prime minister of Ukraine. Thanks to the Nuland-Pyatt 'coalition-building' scheme, the Svoboda party also entered government for the first time, with three of its elected People's Deputies

¹⁷¹ Nuland was Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, from 18 September 2013 to 20 January 2017.

¹⁷² Politician Arseniy Yatseniuk, who was installed as Ukraine's interim prime minister on 27 February 2014, a fortnight after the Nuland-Pyatt call. In office, the newly-installed Yatseniuk was endorsed by a visit from US President Barack Obama. *New York Times*, 12 March 2014. See <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/ukraine-washington.html>>.

¹⁷³ Vitali Klitschko, a People's Deputy in the Ukrainian parliament, who had announced his presidential ambitions in October 2013, before the Euromaidan.

During the Euromaidan, Klitschko was touted by EU leaders as a potential 'strong man' leader who could be relied upon to counter Russian influence on Ukraine. *Der Spiegel*, 8 December 2013. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3kpm85m4>> or <<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-merkel-will-klitschko-zum-praesidenten-aufbauen-a-937853.html>> (source in German).

¹⁷⁴ Alongside Vitali Klitschko ('Klitsch') and Arseniy Yatseniuk ('Yats').

This meeting was one of the first overt US interventions in the Euromaidan. *Voice of America News*, 10 December 2013. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3jec26mz>> or <<https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-president-meets-with-predecessors-western-envoys/1807120.html>>.

becoming cabinet ministers in the post-Maidan interim government. Despite the USA's supposed support for Ukrainian membership of the European Union, as avowed by Senator John McCain in his Kyiv speech, the leaked Nuland-Pyatt conversation also captured Nuland's dismissive verdict: 'Fuck the EU'.

Nuland and Pyatt also talked about the need for someone of great political stature to get involved and lend legitimacy to Ukraine's new US-installed government. Pyatt told Nuland: 'We want to try to get somebody with an international personality to come out here and help to midwife this thing.' Nuland replied that, fortuitously, the US Vice-President's office had proactively contacted her to propose the Vice-President for that role:

[Joe Biden's national security adviser Jake] Sullivan's come back to me [. . .], saying "You need Biden," and I said probably tomorrow for an atta-boy and to get the deets [Sic: details] to stick. So Biden's willing.

On 18 February 2014 – so a fortnight after the Nuland-Pyatt conversation had taken place – the Obama administration announced that Vice-President Biden had called Ukrainian President Yanukovich, to express 'grave concerns' about the Euromaidan protests. What Biden had really done was emphasise the coercive pressure applied by John McCain in December 2013. The White House statement summarised Biden's intervention as: '[Biden] called on President Yanukovich to pull back government forces and to exercise maximum restraint.'¹⁷⁵ Biden's pressure on Yanukovich was reinforced the same day by White House press secretary Joe Carney, who told reporters:

To restore peace and stability we urge President Yanukovich to de-escalate immediately the situation and end the confrontation at Maidan. We also urge him to restart a dialogue with opposition leaders today to develop a consensus way forward for Ukraine.¹⁷⁶

Biden then visited Ukraine in the post-Maidan period, from 21 to 22 April 2014. According to 'a senior administration official' this was also 'an opportunity to meet with our embassy team that has been pretty much working around the clock for the last few months.'¹⁷⁷ More conspicuously, it was an opportunity for

¹⁷⁵ See White House; Office of the Vice President, 18 February 2014. <<https://tinyurl.com/mr37s8pb>> or <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/18/readout-vice-president-bidens-call-ukrainian-president-viktor-yanukovich>>.

¹⁷⁶ White House; Office of the Press Secretary, 2 February 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3jdbaays>> or <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/18/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-2182014>>.

¹⁷⁷ White House; Office of the Vice President, 21 April 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8b4kfc>> or <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/21/background-press-briefing-vice-president-bidens-trip-ukraine>>.

Biden to lecture Ukrainian politicians about the need for reform, which he did at great length in an address to Ukraine's parliament on 22 May. This was immediately followed by a joint press conference with prime minister Arseniy Yatseniuk ('Yats'). Referring to the country's forthcoming parliamentary elections,¹⁷⁸ Biden also made a perfunctory nod toward Ukraine's neo-Nazi problem, saying: 'And just as corruption can have no place in the new Ukraine, neither can anti-Semitism or bigotry. Let me say that again, neither can anti-Semitism or bigotry. No place.'¹⁷⁹ Biden then delivered stern words about rooting out corruption from public life.

Ukrainians have also made clear that after an era of staggering public theft – not debt, public theft – that they will no longer accept corruption from public officials. Your former leader [Yanukovych] had to run in hiding for fear that [sic] after everyone saw the excesses to which his theft had taken him and others.¹⁸⁰ The fact of the matter is [. . .] I'm of the view that Ukrainians east, west, north and south are just sick and tired of the corruption.¹⁸¹

A few weeks after the Ukrainian elections, it was announced that Joe Biden's son, Hunter ('Biden Jr'), had been appointed to the board of directors of a Ukrainian power company called Burisma,¹⁸² which was controlled by Ihor Kolomoisky.

¹⁷⁸ At that time, the most recent Ukrainian elections had been held in 2012, and the next scheduled elections could have occurred as late as October 2017. After President Yanukovych was ousted in February 2014, early elections were scheduled for May that year by Yanukovych's successor, President Poroshenko.

¹⁷⁹ Just how seriously Ukrainian authorities took Biden's warning is illustrated by the case of Vadym Troyan, chief of staff of the Azov Battalion. In October 2014 (six months after Biden had visited Kyiv) Troyim was appointed a deputy minister in the governmental Department of Internal Affairs; in March 2015, Troyim became deputy chief of police in the Kyiv oblast; and seven months after that (November 2015), he was promoted to overall national chief of the Ukrainian police.

¹⁸⁰ Biden was attempting to rewrite history. Yanukovych was the democratically-elected president of a sovereign country, and he had been forced out of office for purely geopolitical reasons.

¹⁸¹ White House; Office of the Vice President, 22 April 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/5ecfkmtc>> or <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/22/remarks-press-vice-president-joe-biden-and-ukrainian-prime-minister-arse>>.

¹⁸² *Petro Global News*, 14 May 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/533pyhym>> or <<https://petroglobalnews.com/2014/05/bidens-son-lands-job-with-ukraine-oil-and-gas-giant/>> and Burisma's press release on Biden Jr's appointment, May 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yp8jexth>> or <<http://burisma.com/hunter-biden-joins-the-team-of-burisma-holdings/>>. (Page now deleted; archive only.)

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Burisma had been founded in 2002 by a Ukrainian oligarch called Mykola Zlochevsky. In 2011 Ihor Kolomoisky became the majority shareholder, when the company was acquired by his Privat Group. It was the same backstage control that Kolomoisky had exerted by becoming the majority shareholder in Ukrnafta.¹⁸³ Mykola Zlochevsky stayed on as Burisma's CEO and nominal owner.¹⁸⁴ Burisma is one of the largest natural gas companies in Ukraine, even though its output is small by global industry standards. Biden Jr was hired by Burisma in April 2014, the same month that vice-president Biden had visited Ukraine.¹⁸⁵ A White House advisor during the Obama presidency later said that Biden Jr should not have accepted the Burisma job, because of Vice-President Biden's involvement in post-Maidan Ukraine:

'The *appearance* of a conflict of interest is good enough, at this level of politics, to keep you from doing things like that.'¹⁸⁶ (Emphasis in original.)

The concern in the Obama-Biden White House appears to have been shared in Ukraine, albeit for different reasons. On 17 April 2014, Burma executive Vadym Pozharskyi emailed Biden Jr's colleague Devon Archer:

'I realize fully that his [Hunter Biden's] role [. . .] is of long term perspective and taking into account *the political weight of our Directors* we have to "use" their personality carefully and strategically wise [sic],

Footnote 182 continued

Reviewing the draft of this Burisma press release, Biden Jr's business partner observed approvingly: 'Thanks [. . .] I think we're sending a strong signal as to whom our friends and backers are.' Emails from Burisma executive Vadym Pozharskyi and Devon Archer, dated 6 May 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3yj4p32n>> or <https://bidenlaptopemails.com/biden-emails/email.php?id=20140506-163022_98652>. This email is one of a trove reportedly found on the infamous laptop that was abandoned at a computer repair shop by Biden Jr in 2019. Some, but not all, of the emails found on the laptop have been authenticated by forensic analysts. The Biden laptop emails are used sparingly here, and only when they are identifiably connected to known events.

¹⁸³ See p. 31 above.

¹⁸⁴ *Anti-Corruption Action Centre*, 26 August 2012, citing an investigation by *Slidstvo*. See <<http://antac.org.ua/en/2012/08/kings-of-ukrainian-gas>>. (Page deleted, archive only.)

¹⁸⁵ *Deutsche Welle*, 16 May 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdfv2zwe>> or <<https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-hunter-bidens-ukrainian-bosses/a-17642254>>. This accords with an email received by Biden Jr, with attachments of scanned paperwork for his new role. Email from Vadym Pozharskyi to Hunter Biden, dated 15 April 2014. <https://bidenlaptopemails.com/biden-emails/email.php?id=20140415-085123_97271>

¹⁸⁶ *The New Yorker*, 1 July 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yc4ehynn>> or <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/will-hunter-biden-jeopardize-his-fathers-campaign>>.

I do realize their vulnerability in this respect. Therefore I kindly suggest to indeed *now or after his father left our country* just put him on our website without going for public camping [sic] [. . .] In some sense we cannot “hide” our directors.’ (Emphases supplied.)¹⁸⁷

At the time Pozharskiy sent this email, Biden Jr had received the paperwork for his Burisma job 24 hours earlier, on 15 April 2014.¹⁸⁸ US Vice-President Biden’s visit to Ukraine was scheduled for a few days later, 21-22 April 2014.

Ultimately, Biden Jr’s Burisma job was not announced until 14 May 2014.¹⁸⁹ US Diplomat George Kent¹⁹⁰ later said that he had attempted to raise the apparent conflict of interest with Vice-President Biden, at some point around ‘January, February, 2015’, but had been knocked back.¹⁹¹

The disquiet in the Obama White House was wholly justified. Biden Jr had been involved in corporate lobbying in the US political system for many years. He had officially relinquished such interests when his father launched his vice-presidential campaign in 2008. When Joe Biden became Obama’s vice-president, rumours began to circulate that Biden Jr was selling private corporations access to the White House. Shortly after the Joe Biden campaign was launched, Biden Jr had founded a consultancy called Seneca Global Advisors. He went on to use the word ‘Seneca’ in the names of several other businesses he founded.¹⁹² No-one seemed to notice that Seneca was an ancient Roman philosopher who also served as principal advisor to the Emperor Nero.

Officially, Biden Jr was on the Burisma books to help monitor the company’s legal compliance and to improve its international reputation. However, positive and objective results of Biden Jr’s hiring are hard to identify. Biden Jr later said that he visited Europe ‘once or twice a year, to attend

¹⁸⁷ Email from Vadym Pozharskiy to Devon Archer, dated 17 April 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3kmtutcf>> or <https://bidenlaptopemails.com/biden-emails/email.php?id=20140417-235004_97468>.

¹⁸⁸ See note 184 above.

¹⁸⁹ See note 187 above.

¹⁹⁰ Deputy Head of Mission at the US Embassy in Kyiv, between 2015 and 2018.

¹⁹¹ US Congress; House of Representatives, 15 October 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8djuer>> or <<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IG/IG00/CPRT-116-IG00-D009.pdf>> (pp. 226-227).

¹⁹² *Washington Post*, 8 April 2022. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2dw4tuvw>> or <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/08/unraveling-tale-hunter-biden-35-million-russia/>>

Burisma board meetings or attend energy forums',¹⁹³ which does not suggest much practical involvement in either interest. Reports of how much Biden Jr was paid for his Ukrainian job vary, but the figure of 50,000 USD a month appears frequently among estimates.¹⁹⁴ At the time of Biden Jr's hiring in 2014, the average household income in Ukraine was equivalent to 1,785 USD a year.¹⁹⁵

In 2016, two years after Vice President Biden and Biden Jr had become involved in Ukraine, the Democratic Party lost the US presidential election to the Republican Party and Donald Trump entered the White House. Biden Jr eventually left Burisma in the same month that Volodymyr Zelensky was elected President of Ukraine, April 2019.

In July 2019, Ukraine's President Zelensky received a phone call from US President Trump. In a much-quoted, and consistently misrepresented, remark, Trump told Zelensky:

There's a lot of talk about [Joe] Biden's son, that [Joe] Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that so whatever you can do with the Attorney General would be great. Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it . . . It sounds horrible to me.¹⁹⁶

What Trump was trying to get Zelensky to do was re-open an investigation into a digital security company called CrowdStrike, which (in Trump's contention) had been involved in foreign attempts to influence the 2016 presidential election.¹⁹⁷ By the time of the Trump-Zelensky call (25 July 2019), Ukraine's serving state prosecutor had already announced that the Bidens weren't even under investigation, never mind facing prosecution:

¹⁹³ *The New Yorker*, 1 July 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yc4ehynn>> or <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/will-hunter-biden-jeopardize-his-fathers-campaign>>.

¹⁹⁴ *New York Times*, 1 May 2019. See <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/us/politics/biden-son-ukraine.html>>.

¹⁹⁵ CEIC Data, (Webpage not dated). See <<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/ukraine/annual-household-income-per-capita>>.

¹⁹⁶ White House; transcript of Trump-Zelensky call on 25 July 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/4e7nvusx>> or <<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Unclassified09.2019.pdf>>.

¹⁹⁷ Trump's 'Ukraine-CrowdStrike' conspiracy theory is summarised in (e.g.) the *Washington Post*, 19 November 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/4naahf5r>> or <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/pompeo-says-trumps-debunked-ukraine-conspiracy-theory-is-worth-looking-into/2019/11/26/66394e98-106e-11ea-9cd7-a1becbc82f5e_story.html>.

I do not want Ukraine to again be the subject of U.S. presidential elections.¹⁹⁸ Hunter Biden did not violate any Ukrainian laws – at least as of now, we do not see any wrongdoing.¹⁹⁹

Establishment media in the UK and US have consistently misconstrued and/or misrepresented what took place in the Trump-Zelensky call. In the full transcript,²⁰⁰ Trump raised the issue as follows:

The [Crowdstrike] server, they say Ukraine has it. There are a lot of things that went on, the whole situation [. . .] I would like to have the Attorney General call you or your people and I would like you to get to the bottom of it.

Zelensky responded to those comments by saying: '[I]n addition to that investigation, I guarantee as the President of Ukraine that all the investigations will be done openly and candidly.' Trump continued his theme by saying:

I heard you had a prosecutor who was very good and he was shut down and that's really unfair. A lot of people are talking about that, the way they shut your very good prosecutor down and you had some very bad people involved.

Only after these remarks about Crowdstrike did Trump add:

The other thing, there's a lot of talk about Biden's son, that Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that so whatever you can do with the Attorney General would be great. Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it . . . It sounds horrible to me.

That Zelensky understood Trump correctly is shown by the fact that Zelensky's reply to that last remark included the statement:

[The prosecutor-general] will look into the situation, *specifically to the company that you mentioned in this issue*. The issue of the investigation of the case is actually the issue of making sure to restore the honesty [sic] so we will take care of that and will work on the investigation of the case. (Emphasis supplied.)

All this shows that Trump was urging an investigation into Crowdstrike, not

¹⁹⁸ This is a reference to Trump's attempt to drag Ukraine into the foreign interference scandal of 2016.

¹⁹⁹ *Bloomberg*, 19 May 2019. See <<https://tinyurl.com/ywwxj4j3>> or <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-16/ukraine-prosecutor-says-no-evidence-of-wrongdoing-by-bidens>>.

²⁰⁰ See note 198 above.

Burisma. At the time of the phone call, Joe Biden was not yet the official Democratic Party candidate for the forthcoming presidential election. Biden Jr was only mentioned by Trump almost in passing, as a possible personal connection with Joe Biden's activities in Ukraine.²⁰¹ Trump's over-riding concern about CrowdStrike was part of his long-lasting and far greater problem: clearing himself of the nebulous charge of colluding with Russia's interference in the 2016 election. Trump's counter-claim, never substantiated, was that the 2016 interference had been Ukrainian, and that CrowdStrike had been involved.²⁰² Any such Ukrainian interference in the US election of 2016 would have occurred under Zelensky's predecessor and opponent, President Poroshenko, and therefore (from a Trumpian perspective) Zelensky might have been predisposed to uncovering Poroshenko's supposed misdeeds.²⁰³

In their conversation, Zelensky reassured Trump:

'Since we have won the absolute majority in our Parliament, the next prosecutor general will be 100% my person, my candidate, who will be approved by the parliament and will start as a new prosecutor in September. He or she will look into the situation.'²⁰⁴

None of Zelensky's blandishments was fulfilled. His new Prosecutor-General was Ruslan Ryaboshapka, appointed on 29 August 2019.²⁰⁵ Ryaboshapka reviewed some existing cases against Burisma, which had been opened and closed under the Poroshenko administration (2014-2019), but did not open any investigations into CrowdStrike. Nor did he find evidence justifying an investigation of Joe or Hunter Biden, specifically stating that: 'I have no such information.'²⁰⁶ When Ryaboshapka was eventually dismissed by Zelensky in March 2020, it was for failing to come up with what Zelensky really wanted: a successful prosecution case against ex-President Poroshenko.

Trump would obviously have liked to get his hands on any evidence of

²⁰¹ It is possible that Trump may have suspected that Biden Jr was somehow connected to the CrowdStrike issue. At this time (2019), it was well-known that Biden Jr had been employed in Ukraine since 2014. The idea that Trump had only just noticed this can be dismissed.

²⁰² The CrowdStrike server referred to in Trump-Zelensky conversation had supposedly been spirited to Ukraine, out of the reach of US authorities.

²⁰³ Hunter Biden's infamous laptop, containing information about his Burisma role, did not become public until October 2020, which was 15 months after the Trump-Zelensky phone conversation had taken place.

²⁰⁴ Ukraine's parliamentary elections were three days before this conversation.

²⁰⁵ See page 17 above.

²⁰⁶ *Reuters*, 4 October 2019. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-trump-whistleblower-ukraine-idUKKBN1WJ13H>.

wrongdoing by the Bidens. The circumstances of Biden Jr's employment at Burisma were invitingly murky,²⁰⁷ and so Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, was sniffing around for clues. This insulated Trump from accusation that he was personally trying to smear the Bidens. Giuliani's sleuthing eventually brought him into contact with Zelensky's patron, oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who controlled Burisma and claimed to have information about the Bidens, 'father and son'. According to one US lawyer who had dealings with Ukrainian politicians, Kolomoisky had been 'floating that [claim] out for quite a while, to keep himself relevant to the whole discussion, and he would also like to ingratiate himself to [Sic] Trump [. . .] He's been kind of cryptic and cute about it.'²⁰⁸

In spreading the rumour that he possessed compromising material about Joe and Hunter Biden, Kolomoisky hadn't overtly stated an intention to blackmail them, but that was the dangling implication. Rudy Giuliani arranged for intermediaries to meet with Kolomoisky, but what transpired between them remains unknown. The only thing Kolomoisky and the Giuliani intermediaries agree on is that the meeting ended prematurely and very acrimoniously, with threats of physical violence.

There have long been rumours that Kolomoisky employs blackmail as an instrument of political coercion, and specifically that he has blackmailed Volodymyr Zelensky in some way.²⁰⁹ If blackmail was on Kolomoisky's mind in late 2019, he was only dancing to the mood music that permeated Washington DC at the time. The Trump-Biden drama involved forms of covert pressure by both men that could easily be described as blackmail, and in each case the blackmail involved Ukraine. Trump's contention, expressed in the 25 July 2019 conversation with Zelensky, was that Biden had improperly acted to get a

²⁰⁷ They remain murky. Shortly after Biden Jr's recruitment by Burisma in April 2014, a Burisma executive asked Biden Jr to intervene in a spot of bother the company was having with the Ukrainian government, pleading for him to 'use your influence to convey a message/signal, etc .to stop what we consider to be politically motivated actions'. Biden Jr, a private US citizen, had no direct access to or influence over the Ukrainian government. Email from Vadym Pozharskyi to Hunter Biden, dated 12 May 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2s4efwp4>> or <https://bidenlaptopemails.com/biden-emails/email.php?id=20140512-082924_79408>. The same executive later thanked Biden Jr for 'the opportunity to meet your father and spent [sic] some time together'. Joe Biden has consistently denied meeting anyone from Burisma. Email from Vadym Pozharskyi to Hunter Biden, dated 17 April 2015. See <https://bidenlaptopemails.com/biden-emails/email.php?id=20150417-100051_102089>.

²⁰⁸ *Politico*, 3 October 2019. See <<https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/03/ukraine-scandal-digenova-toensing-022049>>.

²⁰⁹ Rudenko (see note 27) p. 110 alludes to the existence of these rumours, but provides only one, tantalising detail: the alleged blackmail involves 'recordings' of Zelensky.

Ukrainian prosecutor fired. Biden had indeed leant heavily on Ukraine to fire the prosecutor, and the reason Biden gave at the time (and ever since) was that the prosecutor was corrupt.

Trump was apparently trying to blackmail Ukraine into re-opening the Crowdstrike case, by withholding foreign military aid worth 391 million USD. He didn't discuss this with Zelensky in the 25 July 2019 phone call, but it wouldn't be long before Zelensky was told by his own advisors that the aid hadn't materialised.²¹⁰ When Trump later realised that his private conversation with Zelensky had been leaked, but before it became known to the public, he quickly authorised the payment of the withheld money to Ukraine.²¹¹

The Biden case is more complex. Biden had apparently blackmailed Ukraine's president Poroshenko, by threatening to withhold loan guarantees, during a visit Biden made to Kyiv in December 2015. The price of US aid to Ukraine, as demanded by Biden, was the sacking of state prosecutor-general Viktor Shokin, who was indeed eventually sacked. In August 2016 – barely nine months after the Kyiv incident with Poroshenko – Biden had told the story without putting himself in the central role, and without suggesting that his actions had directly precipitated Shokin's sacking.²¹² But three years later, in 2018, Biden recounted the incident as follows:

And I went over, I guess, the 12th, 13th time to Kiev. And I was supposed to announce that there was another billion-dollar loan guarantee. And I had gotten a commitment from Poroshenko and from Yatsenyuk that they would take action against the state prosecutor. And they didn't.

So they said they had – they were walking out to a press conference. I said, nah, I'm not going to – or, we're not going to give you the billion dollars. They said, you have no authority. You're not the president. The president said – I said, call him. I said, I'm telling you,

²¹⁰ Trump's remarks to Zelensky included the slightly Godfatherish reminder: 'The United States has been very, very good to Ukraine. I wouldn't say that it's reciprocal necessarily because things are happening that are not good but the United States has been very very good to Ukraine.' Zelensky's response to that included the words: 'I would also like to thank you for your great support in the area of defense. We are ready to continue to cooperate for the next steps, specifically we are almost ready to buy more Javelins [missiles] from the United States for defense purposes.'

²¹¹ This arbitrarily withheld aid was one of the 'Abuse of Power' charges in Trump's first impeachment trial, which took place from January to February 2020. Trump was acquitted on all charges, and therefore is not officially regarded as a blackmailer.

²¹² *The Atlantic*, 26 August 2016. See <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/joe-biden-interview/497633/>>.

you're not getting the billion dollars. I said, you're not getting the billion. I'm going to be leaving here in, I think it was about six hours. I looked at them and said: I'm leaving in six hours. If the prosecutor is not fired, you're not getting the money. Well, son of a bitch. He got fired.²¹³

The way Biden retold this event in 2018 belies the complexity of what happened. It is true that the US, under President Barack Obama, withheld one billion USD in loan guarantees, exactly as Biden had said would happen, but this was only one event among many that led to Shokin's dismissal. The Ukrainian prosecutor-general had been an international problem for years. He was seen as inept, partisan, and corrupt, and this was widely acknowledged. It eventually culminated in mass demonstrations in Kyiv, demanding his resignation. Shokin was eventually dismissed by a vote in the Ukrainian parliament, which took place on 29 March 2016. Biden's apparent belief (in 2018) that he had managed to get Shokin sacked in the six hours before flying out of Kyiv (in 2015) looks like a case of artistic licence to improve an anecdote. It remains unlikely that Joe Biden wanted Shokin sacked to protect Biden Jr. However, the supposition that Shokin posed a threat to Biden Jr's role at Burisma finds a glimmer of support in an email found on Biden Jr's laptop which forwarded news coverage of Shokin's dismissal, with the sender's remark 'this just hit. at least doesn't mention HB'.²¹⁴

Kolomoisky, observing all this in 2019, must have been delighted to see that the US was run just like Ukraine, since he knew how to operate in Ukraine and understood the rules of the *systema* game. In 2016, Ukrainian anti-corruption campaigner Daria Kaleniuk had summed up that game as follows:

²¹³ Council on Foreign Relations: 'Foreign Affairs Issue Launch with Former Vice President Joe Biden', 23 January 2018. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yd4tevcy>> or <<https://www.cfr.org/event/foreign-affairs-issue-launch-former-vice-president-joe-biden>>. Biden's remarks commence at 54 minutes and 45 seconds into the video, and are included in the transcript on the same page. The video of this press conference is permanently available at <<https://archive.org/details/council-on-foreign-relations-issue-launch-23-january-2018>>.

Biden's recollection of the circumstances is reflected in remarks he made about the 'cancer of corruption' during the press conference in question. White House, Office of the Vice President: 'Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko', 7 December 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3up5fuyv>> or <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/07/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-and-ukrainian-president-petro>>.

²¹⁴ Email from Karen Tramontano, forwarded to Hunter Biden, dated 31 March 2016. See <https://bidenlaptopemails.com/biden-emails/email.php?id=20160331-212626_86351>. The news coverage in question was an opinion piece from the *New York Times*. See <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/opinion/ukraines-unyielding-corruption.html>>.

I have *kompromat* against you, you have *kompromat* against me, I have some prosecutors, you have some judges. Let's not fight publicly but come to an agreement.'²¹⁵

As it turned out, Joe Biden won the 2020 US presidential election, and (as discussed above) one of his administration's first actions on taking office in 2021 was to bar Kolomoisky from entering the USA. In April (the month after Kolomoisky was banned from the US), Zelensky proposed an anti-oligarch law.²¹⁶ People designated oligarchs under this new law were to be banned from funding political parties. They would have to declare their oligarch status during any communication with civil servants or elected politicians, and the civil servants and politicians themselves would have to register a declaration of the contact. The designated oligarchs would also be banned from buying shares during the privatisation of state-owned industries and agencies. Zelensky's new law was drafted, put to the Ukrainian parliament, and enacted within the space of five months.²¹⁷

It is hard to believe that Zelensky just happened to embark on this anti-oligarch project without behind-the-scenes pressure from the US. By the time he put forward his new law, he had been President of Ukraine for over a year, but Biden had been President of the USA for just two months. But soon both Biden and Zelensky would have bigger things to worry about. On 24 February 2022, Ukraine was invaded by Russia.

²¹⁵ *The New Yorker*, 29 August 2016 (see note 169 above).

²¹⁶ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 15 April 2021. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/04/15/7290367/>> (source in Ukrainian).

²¹⁷ 'Draft Law on Prevention of Threats to National Security Associated with Excessive Influence of Persons Who Have Significant Economic or Political Weight in Public Life (Oligarchs)'; Verkhovna Rada, official portal; Ukraine. See <https://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua./pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=72105> (source in Ukrainian).

