

Gonzalo Lira and the kill chain (continued)

The Bandera legacy

Under Stepan Bandera's leadership, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)¹ had pledged allegiance to Nazi Germany, since both the Third Reich and the OUN sought to defeat the Soviet Union.² The OUN's paramilitary branch, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, enthusiastically helped to round up and murder the region's Jews. Since the OUN's aim was Ukrainian independence, its Insurgent Army also attempted to exterminate the Polish population in areas the OUN considered Ukrainian territory. Lacking the Reich's means of industrial genocide, the OUN used more direct methods.

One 1943 report from Polish resistance fighters, detailing OUN atrocities in what is now western Ukraine, would be difficult to believe, were it not corroborated by testimony from the perpetrators themselves.³

In all villages, settlements and colonies, without exception, the Ukrainians carried out the operation of murdering Poles with monstrous cruelty. Women – even pregnant ones – were nailed to the ground with bayonets, children were ripped apart by their legs, others were impaled on pitchforks and thrown over fences, members of intelligentsia were tied with barbed wire and thrown into wells, arms, legs and heads were chopped off with axes, tongues were cut out, ears and noses were cut off, eyes were gouged, genitals were butchered, bellies ripped open and entrails pulled out, heads were smashed with hammers, living children were thrown inside burning houses.⁴

1 To be strictly precise, it was the OUN-B, the extremist faction led by Bandera after an OUN schism in 1940. The other OUN faction (OUN-M) was led by the moderate Andriy Melnyk. Bandera was born in 1909 and died in 1959; Melnyk was born in 1890 and died in 1964.

2 The historical resonance of Ukraine's Soviet past is undoubtedly a factor in the rise of modern Banderism during the repeated Russian encroachments of the 21st Century. The Banderites gloss over the fact that Bandera envisioned an ethnically-cleansed and monocultural independent Ukraine, ideologically totalitarian in nature and with no internal democratic opposition.

3 Cited in, for example, Jared McBride (2016): 'Peasants into Perpetrators: The OUN-UPA and the Ethnic Cleansing of Volhynia, 1943–1944', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 75, No. 3. pp. 630-654. See <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5612/slavicreview.75.3.0630>> (not archived).

4 Cited in Ewa Siemaszko and Władysław Siemaszko (2000), 'The July 1943 genocidal operations of the OUN-UPA in Volhynia'. See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdju7h3p>> or <https://zbrodniawolynska.pl/ftp/zbrodnia_wolynska/The-July-1943-genocidal-operations-of-the-OUN-UPA-in-Volhynia.pdf>.



Stepan Bandera

This, then, was the historical Ukrainian nationalism revered by the staff of the Ukrainian police and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA). Modern Ukraine's flourishing far-right extremism had particularly strong roots in the Kharkiv oblast and in Kharkiv itself, where Gonzalo Lira was living when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The oblast's criminal nationalists had solid connections to the Zelensky government, particularly in the form of the ethno-fascist and neo-Nazi coteries that Arsen Avakov had both nurtured and allowed to infiltrate the MOIA. In July 2021, Avakov was pushed into resigning by Ukraine's President Zelensky, who seems to have regarded Avakov

as a potential rival. But what Avakov had done outlived his time in government.

In 2018, with a Ukrainian presidential election on the horizon, a report for the US NGO Freedom House had called Ukraine's domestic affairs 'increasingly worrying'. It explained that the proliferating far-right and fascist activists 'challenge the legitimacy of the state, undermine its democratic institutions, and discredit the country's law enforcement agencies'.⁵ The director of Amnesty International's Ukrainian chapter had said:

We see signs that the Ukrainian state is rapidly losing its monopoly on violence. Instead, its functions and powers are arbitrarily taken over by those who have weapons and physical strength.⁶

A USAID specialist in post-Soviet economies had said:

There's no easy way to eradicate the virulent far-right extremism that has been poisoning Ukrainian politics and public life, but without vigorous and immediate efforts to counteract it, it may soon endanger the state itself.⁷

⁵ Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy*, report published May 2018. See <<https://shorturl.at/kpvAI>> or <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>>.

⁶ Amnesty International, 18 March 2018. See <<https://shorturl.at/ixST8>> or <<http://amnesty.org.ua/nws/derzhava-vtrachaye-kontrol-nad-radikalnimi-ugrupuvannyami-shho-aktivizovalysya-u-niztsi-mist-ukrayini/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁷ Reuters, 20 March 2018. See <<https://shorturl.at/qyDLZ>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cohen-ukraine-commentary/commentary-ukraines-neo-nazi-problem-idUSKBN1GV2TY/>>.

Every warning had been ignored as the Ukrainian state propped itself up with the help of the country's ultra far-right gangs, and in doing so ceded more and more power to them.

During his election campaign, in April 2019, candidate Volodymyr Zelensky – seeking to draw in as many voters as possible – equivocated on the issue of Bandera's national popularity. He stated that:

Stepan Bandera is a hero for a certain part of Ukrainians, and this is a normal and cool thing. He was one of those who defended the freedom of Ukraine. But I think that when we name so many streets, bridges by the same name, this is not quite right.⁸

When Zelensky was elected president a few days later, the ultranationalist corruption of the Ukrainian state continued unabated.

In 2019, Andriy Medvedko, one of the murderers of Oles Buzina (see page 8 of part 1) was elected to the civil oversight council of Ukraine's National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU), a specialist government task force that investigates public officials who are suspected of wrongdoing and prepares any criminal charges against them.⁹ The month after Medvedko was elected to the NABU council, he organised a neo-Nazi rock concert in Kyiv, at which President Zelensky's prime minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk, was guest of honour. Tellingly, Honcharuk was accompanied by Zelensky's minister for the temporarily occupied territories – a title referring to the secessionist Donbas region that had attempted to break free of Ukraine in March 2014.¹⁰

Neither the prime minister nor the occupied territories minister ever faced any official censure for endorsing Medvedko's event. In 2021, while still serving on the NABU panel, Andriy Medvedko was also elected to the advisory council of the Ukrainian government's Ministry of Veterans' Affairs.¹¹ In November 2021, Right Sector's Dmytro Yarosh became an advisor to the Ukrainian army's top

⁸ *Unian*, 18 April 2019. See <<https://shorturl.at/gnuO3>> or <<https://www.unian.info/politics/10521105-zelensky-on-bandera-ukrainians-should-also-praise-modern-day-heroes.html>>.

⁹ NABU statement, 30 September 2019. See <<https://shorturl.at/twOT0>> or <<https://nabu.gov.ua/news/novyny-rezultaty-reytingovogo-internet-golosuvannya-za-dvoh-chleniv-rady-gromadskogo-kontrolyu/>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹⁰ *Kyiv Post*, 16 October 2019. See <<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/7729>>.

¹¹ *Zaborona*, 23 March 2021. See <<https://shorturl.at/muFT0>> or <<https://zaborona.com/pravoradikali-potrapi-do-gromadskoyi-radi-pri-ministerstvi-veteraniv-ukrayini/>> (source in Ukrainian).

general, Valeriy Zaluzhny,¹² who is himself an open admirer of Stepan Bandera.¹³ When Ukraine's parliament commemorated Bandera's birthday by publishing a photo of Zaluzhny with a portrait of Bandera, the prime minister and foreign minister of Poland objected in public. Ukraine's parliament then quietly retracted the photo, but did not apologise or even refer to the incident at all. In 2024, President Zelensky announced that he would appoint General Zaluzhny to the post of Ukrainian Ambassador to the United Kingdom.¹⁴



General Valeriy Zaluzhny commemorates Bandera's birthday, 1 January 2022.

The continued fascist and neo-Nazi presence in Ukraine's governmental structures during the Zelensky presidency was predictable, and it had been predicted. Asked in 2016 whether Arsen Avakov's eventual departure would affect Azov's penetration of the government, Andriy Biletsky said Azov would carry on interrupted. He stated that Azov would regard Avakov's absence as just another reshuffle within the political system, pointing out that: 'We are opposed to this system as a whole.'¹⁵

IV. Strange people in a strange land

You guys know of certain issues that I've discussed previously, you know, the amount of time that I have is limited [. . .] Secretly we think that, throughout all of recorded history everybody has died – except us. We're going be that exception [. . .] And if you trick yourself into

¹² UAWire, 3 November 2021. See <<https://shorturl.at/bnrMQ>> or <<https://www.uawire.org/former-leader-of-right-sector-becomes-advisor-to-commander-in-chief-of-ukrainian-armed-forces>>.

Zaluzhny's title 'commander in chief' is a constitutional fiction invented by president Zelensky in 2021. In practice, the *de facto* commander in chief can be overruled, demoted, or sacked by the president of Ukraine, who can also dictate military strategy. Zelensky is therefore the *de jure* commander-in-chief.

¹³ *El Pais*, 4 June 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/iGRZ8>> or <<https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-06-04/valerii-zaluzhnyi-the-man-with-ukraines-future-in-his-hands.html>>.

¹⁴ BBC News, 7 March 2024. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68506937>>.

¹⁵ *Focus*, 4 October 2016. See <<https://focus.ua/politics/358170>>(source in Russian).

thinking – just as irrationally as you think that you’re immortal – if you trick yourself into thinking that, ‘Oh, you know, in a year’s time, just one year, in May of 2022, I’m going to be dead. So what am I going to do with this year that I have left?’ If you think that way, you’re going to get a lot more out of that year you have.¹⁶

At 6:20 pm on the evening of 2 March 2022, an unmarked black SUV arrived outside the Kharkiv apartment block where Gonzalo Lira was living at the time. By happenstance, Lira was outside the building, smoking a cigarette nearby. He was in an unsettled mood, because of the intense hostility being directed at him via the internet. A clip from his YouTube channel, in which he execrated the Zelensky government with particular vehemence, had been shown on Russian television the previous evening and, as a result, had been widely shared online. Lira watched as a group of men entered the building, spoke to the reception area’s concierge team, and then stepped into the elevator. The men wore dark civilian clothing, and Lira’s impression was that they were military, based on their strong upright postures.

When Lira tried to enter the building, one of the concierge team spoke urgently to him. Lira did not speak Ukrainian or Russian, but could distinguish the word ‘*Banderivsta*’. The concierge then physically pushed Lira toward the lobby door and out of the building. Outside, Lira spoke to his neighbour by phone, and learned that a group of men had appeared outside his apartment. The neighbour said they had hammered on the door so loudly that it sounded like they might have been attempting to force entry. Lira ‘freaked the fuck out’ and left. A friend in Kharkiv sheltered Lira for the night. The next day, a shaken Lira read the sobering news of the disappearance and murder of Kreminna mayor Volodymyr Struk, and reflected on his own experience.

Volodymyr Struk (born 1964) had been mayor of Kreminna, a small town in the would-be secessionist Donbas region. On 1 December 2014, a lengthy account of Struk’s misconduct was published on the Myrotvorets website, detailing his support for Russia’s invasion of Crimea earlier that year. Struk was referred to as ‘The traitor of the motherland. An accomplice of terrorists and Russian occupiers.’ Myrotvorets also published Struk’s full name and his home address. When Russia eventually invaded the Donbas in February 2022, Struk was one of



Volodymyr Struk

¹⁶ Gonzalo Lira, ‘Knowing When You’re Going to Die’, Patreon.com, 19 May 2021; re-uploaded to YouTube 2 February 2024. See <<https://youtu.be/6RUB0olgTKw>> commencing at 4m 13s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/knowning-when-youre-going-to-die>>.

the first to extend a figurative welcome. He was abducted from his home by masked men on 1 March, and his dead body – with a gunshot wound to the heart – was found the next day, dumped in a nearby village street.¹⁷ A photograph of Struk's dead body was added to his Myrotvorets entry the same day, with the word 'eliminated' stamped diagonally across it.¹⁸

After his own encounter on 2 March, Gonzalo Lira claimed to have moved to a safe location in Kharkiv city, which he did not disclose.¹⁹ Wherever it was, it wasn't safe enough. In mid-April 2022, Lira's online activity suddenly ceased. Lira had been booked to appear on George Galloway's YouTube programme, *The Mother of All Talk Shows*, on 19 April. When Lira failed to make contact at the appointed time, Galloway immediately raised the alarm. Galloway told his 350,000 subscribers of his 'great concern and anxiety' at Lira's sudden silence, which meant that Lira might be in 'grave danger'. Galloway called the situation 'close to an emergency'.²⁰

On 20 April, with Lira still not having reappeared, former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter posted a social media message proposing that Lira had been 'kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by the Kraken Unit, part of the Azov battalion'. Ritter declared: 'Free speech isn't a one way street. To remain silent in the murder of Gonzo Lira is to be complicit in his death.'²¹ The Kraken Unit is real,²² and – given Lira's near-miss with unidentified heavies on 2 March – so were the widespread concerns about his wellbeing. But Ritter had gathered his dramatic information from social media, and unsurprisingly it was dramatically wrong.

¹⁷ *Focus.ua*, 3 March 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/btR46>> or <<https://focus.ua/voennye-novosti/508317-v-luganskoy-oblasti-zastretili-mera-kremennoy-kotoryy-podderzhival-Inr-gerashchenkoa>> (source in Russian).

¹⁸ <<https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/struk-vladimir-alekseevich/>> (source in Ukrainian). See page captures from February and August 2023.

¹⁹ Gonzalo Lira, 'Punching Up: Zelensky, Kolomoyskyi, Ukraine, and What's Going On | A CoachStream from Kharkiv', YouTube.com, 3 March 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/iz4KhdoVCyw>> commencing at 20m 38s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/a-coach-stream-from-kharkiv>>.

²⁰ George Galloway, 'Has Gonzalo Lira been KILLED or kidnapped by Ukrainian extremists?' YouTube, 19 April 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/74dcLySXcYA>> *passim*. Archived at <<https://shorturl.at/apJS2>> or <<https://archive.org/details/has-gonzalo-lira-been-killed-or-kidnapped-by-ukrainian-extremists>>.

²¹ Scott Ritter, Telegram (social media platform), 20 April 2022. See <<https://t.me/ScottRitter/27>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/bL37I>>.

²² Although it is not part of the Azov Battalion, as Ritter supposed. While its fighters are Azov battalion veterans, Kraken is a separate special forces team. *Ukrainian Pravda*, 12 March 2023. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2023/03/7/7392249/>>.

Lira reappeared on 30 April, with a short video published on a newly-created YouTube channel, and soon excoriated Ritter's 'injudicious' and 'hysterical' claims. Lira had in fact been detained by the SBU on 15 April and held incommunicado until 22 April.²³ In a later video, Lira praised George Galloway for having raised the alarm, saying:

God bless George Galloway [. . .] When I didn't show up, he made a big stink about it. And other people picked up on it. And they all made a big stink about it. Because I'd been, like, present . . . and then suddenly I'm gone. And people noticed that.²⁴

Lira never spoke publicly about what had happened during what he called his lost week, perhaps having been warned against doing so by his captors. The Kharkiv branch of the SBU is known to operate a secret detention centre somewhere in the oblast. A 2016 investigation by UN Human Rights inspectors located and identified 13 people who had been 'disappeared' in Kharkiv during the preceding two years and were being arbitrarily held at this facility. The UN inspectors noted that SBU abductees were subjected to abuse and outright torture, and were frequently denied medical treatment.²⁵

As Lira later explained, he had created his new YouTube channel because the SBU had demanded his social media passwords and then locked him out of all his existing accounts. If the SBU had hoped to prevent Lira from reaching the international public with his inflammatory videos, then it didn't work and could even be said to have backfired. Lira continued his broadsides on this new YouTube channel and a new Twitter account, now surrounded by the aura of intrigue that always accompanies attempted censorship. Having amassed some 80,000 subscribers with his now-locked YouTube channel, his new channel rapidly attracted 300,000.

Sarah's stories

Among those who did not appreciate Lira's output was an American living in Ukraine, who had moved there almost as soon as Russian invaded in February 2022, ostensibly to write a book about the situation. Sarah Ashton-Cirillo (born 1977) never had any intention of behaving objectively in Ukraine. She told a

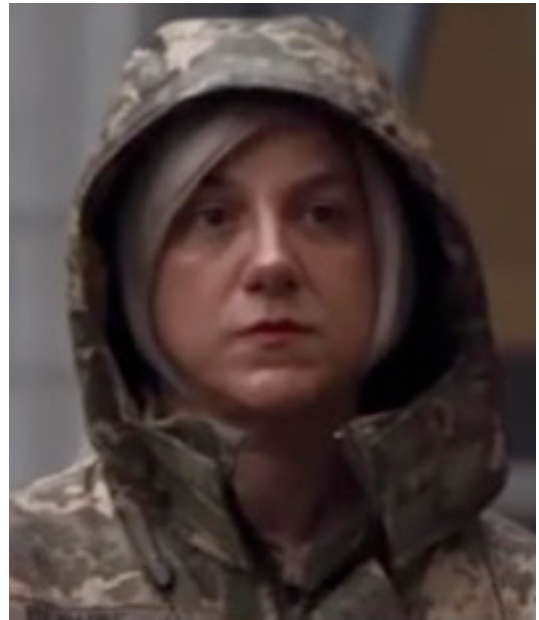
²³ Gonzalo Lira, 'I No Longer Trust Scott Ritter', YouTube.com, 20 May 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/OkMOc4jydOg>> *passim*. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-ii-20.05.2022-i-no-longer-trust-scott-ritter>>.

²⁴ Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1 of part 1. Commencing at 37m 03s.

²⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 May to 15 August 2016*, p. 14, paragraphs 45 and 45. See <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine15thReport.pdf>>.

journalist that visiting the Baltic states some years earlier had 'led me to hate Russia'.²⁶

Upon arriving in Ukraine, Ashton-Cirillo apparently decided to become a war correspondent instead and was immediately granted press accreditation by the Ukrainian government. Ashton-Cirillo, who had no journalistic experience whatsoever, began filing a series of freelance stories for US-based online news outlet, *LGBTQ Nation*. Ashton-Cirillo used this platform to exaggerate Ukrainian acceptance of sexual minorities,²⁷ to praise the US State Department's 'incredible' support for those minorities,²⁸ and to applaud Ukraine's president Zelensky for considering the legalisation of civil partnership for same-sex couples.²⁹ When a fellow activist was assaulted in Kyiv, Ashton-Cirillo was quick to blame the attack on a suspected 'Russian saboteur'.³⁰ The assailant was never identified.



Sarah Ashton-Cirillo
(Credit: Voice of America)

After filing 40 articles with *LGBTQ Nation*, mostly comprising 'colour pieces' and personal opinion,³¹ Ashton-Cirillo abruptly stopped submitting work. She was briefly employed in a civilian capacity by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, then signed up as a combat medic with the Ukrainian military, and subsequently went into active service with the country's reservists, the Territorial Defence

²⁶ *Washington Blade*, 23 December 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/aBP89>> or <<https://www.washingtonblade.com/2022/12/22/transgender-journalist-joins-ukrainian-military/>>.

²⁷ 4 June 2022.

See <<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/06/lgbtq-life-thriving-ukraine-thanks-arts/>>.

²⁸ 19 July 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/fjqrB>> or <<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/07/us-state-department-never-stops-working-lgbtq-americans/>>.

²⁹ 3 August 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/hiASV>> or <<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/08/cautious-optimism-ukraines-zelensky-addresses-marriage-equality/>>.

The Ukrainian constitution defines marriage as a male-female union.

³⁰ 14 April 2022

<<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/04/prominent-lgbtq-feminist-leader-attacked-ukraine/>>.

³¹ Ashton-Cirillo's 40 articles are each tagged with an *LGBTQ Nation* editorial category. Ranked, they fall into: life (18 articles); world news (8 articles); commentary (7 articles); news (3 articles); US election 2024 (2 articles); politics (1 article); and US news (1 article). Five of these articles (i.e. 12.5 per cent) were specifically about Ashton-Cirillo's own experiences as a transgender person in a war zone.

Unit. The next year, in August 2023, she became a spokesperson for the Ukrainian military.³² Throughout these upward transformations, Ashton-Cirillo maintained a steady social media output, and had amassed over 100,000 followers on Twitter alone by the time she took on her formal media relations duties for the Ukrainian government. How many of Ashton-Cirillo's followers were fully cognisant of her constantly shapeshifting roles is impossible to estimate.

Ashton-Cirillo had gone from activism masquerading as journalism, to becoming another kind of activist by maintaining her media output while enlisted, and ultimately ended up as an outright military propagandist. It would be hard for a naïve or casual observer, relying solely on her media output, to distinguish any of Ashton-Cirillo's roles from another. For example, she started working for the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence in August 2022, but carried on filing stories with *LGBTQ Nation* until the end of the month. It seems that Ashton-Cirillo herself was not at pains to clarify what was going on. She summarised her activities in Ukraine as consisting of 'a variety of both civilian and military capacities'.³³

Ashton-Cirillo had entered Ukraine via Poland in early March 2022, on a train journey that took her from Przemysl (15 km from Poland's Ukrainian border) to Lviv in western Ukraine (78 km from the border). The train from Przemysl to Lviv would normally take around two hours but took Ashton-Cirillo five hours due to delays caused by the train-bound exodus of Ukrainian civilians heading in the opposite direction.³⁴

How and when Ashton-Cirillo arrived in Poland in the first place is unclear. By her own account, she flew from the USA to Germany and then immediately caught a train to Przemysl. Since Ashton-Cirillo lived in Nevada, on the western side of North America, this means that the flight alone took at least 11 hours. It is not known where she disembarked in Germany. The German international airport closest to the Polish border is Dresden, which is still more than 700 km from Przemysl. As there is no direct train between the two settlements, any such journey would take at least 10 hours and involve at least two changes. By Ashton-Cirillo's own account, her stay in Przemysl had only lasted about 13

³² Rather tellingly, despite Ashton-Cirillo's eagerness to promote Ukraine as a haven of LGBTQ acceptance, neither President Zelensky nor anyone else in high command has ever been photographed or filmed with her.

³³ *Newsweek*, 03 August 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/RoX32>> or <<https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-military-has-new-transgender-spokesperson-1817334>>.

³⁴ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, *Political Tips*, 22 December 2022. See <<https://www.political.tips/p/sarah-ashton-cirillos-ukraine-photo>>.

hours, before some complete strangers persuaded her to travel to Ukraine.

When Ashton-Cirillo arrived in Lviv (after a journey of another five hours, as discussed above) she immediately applied for press credentials through the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence. Her anonymous companions seemingly disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared, since she never mentioned them again. Ashton-Cirillo received her press accreditation within five days³⁵ and on the same day she somehow met 'these strange men who were security service members of the Ukrainian armed forces and security services' [sic]. These strange men told Ashton-Cirillo that they were departing for Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine, and she had an hour to decide whether to go with them. Ashton-Cirillo accepted this invitation (the second important invitation she had received from complete strangers in just five days) and travelled with them to Kharkiv, a journey of over 1,000 km.

When she arrived in Kharkiv, she immediately started working for the Kharkiv media hub. This was, and still is, a public relations centre that organises press tours, and offers briefings with government officials and what it refers to only as 'off the record events'. The Kharkiv media hub had been established as soon as the Russian invasion began, and works in partnership with the state news agency, Ukrinform.³⁶

Taking her own account³⁷ at face value, Ashton-Cirillo had arbitrarily set out on a journey with no clear destination in mind, on the off-chance that she might write a book. Her journey eventually exceeded 6,000 kms, costing her well over 1,000 USD, and she completed it in about a week. During this time, she traversed at least four countries, three of whose languages she could not speak, read, or write, scarcely pausing for rest while repeatedly changing her mind

³⁵ This raises the interesting question of why the accreditation was granted at all, since Ashton-Cirillo was not (and never had been) employed by a mass media outlet, and she supposedly did not have a paid job lined up in Ukraine either.

Ashton-Cirillo would only have been eligible for a work permit after joining the Kharkiv media hub. A Ukrainian work permit is job-specific, and the applicant is the employer, not the employee. Given her rapid and seemingly-inexplicable press accreditation, and the Kharkiv media hub's state affiliation, it appears that the government may have smoothed Ashton-Cirillo's arrival in Ukraine by facilitating her employment and then doing all her immigration paperwork for her. Her work permit would have had to be replaced whenever her job title changed, and of course all her subsequent positions were also with branches of the Ukrainian government

³⁶ Kharkiv Media Hub, 27 May 2022. See <https://mediacenter.org.ua/kharkiv-media-hub-launches-in-kharkiv/>.

³⁷ Provided piecemeal during an interview with the USA's Helsinki Commission, 27 October 2022. See transcript at <https://shorturl.at/iHIP9> or https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Final-Transcript_Helsinki-on-the-Hill-Sarah-Ashton-Cirillo.pdf. Archived at <https://archive.org/details/final-transcript-helsinki-on-the-hill-sarah-ashton-cirillo/>.

about what she was doing and where she was going. Throughout her travels, she had made spontaneous and highly-organised decisions, which included completing paperwork issued by a foreign government in order to obtain a professional status to which she was not entitled (in a country where she had no automatic right to work in the first place). Along the way, absolutely pivotal travel decisions were made at the suggestion of English-speaking strangers – some of them intelligence officers – who immediately persuaded her to accompany them on unexpected journeys to dangerous faraway places. To cap it all, she had done the whole thing alone and unaided.

Just about the only thing that suggests Ashton-Cirillo's version of events was not the cover story for a professional intelligence 'insertion' is the fact that it is so patently ludicrous that it invites doubts instead of deflecting them.

Having discarded the claim that she was in Europe to research material for a new book and started filing stories for *LGBTQ Nation* instead (while NB working for a state-affiliated media centre), Ashton-Cirillo described her new situation in the company of the Ukrainian military as 'embedded'.³⁸ Embedded reporting is a highly-subjective activity, in which a media actor³⁹ travels with, and is therefore under the protection of, a military unit on deployment. During such deployment, the media actor only sees conflict from one point of view and only hears corresponding opinions. During this experience, which is inherently dangerous to a greater or lesser degree, he or she inevitably develops a strong emotional bond with their own protectors. These relationships are all the more seductive because, while the media actor is in possession of material not obtainable elsewhere, 'in the absence of the structure provided by a newsroom, they lack any professional policies to guide those relationships'.⁴⁰

Rather like access journalism, such as being part of the White House press pool, embedding means exclusive reliance on one authoritative source, with little or no balance or accountability available. The audience only sees what happened in front of the camera, and the embedded media actor is often the only person an audience hears from. Reports from embedded positions are therefore inherently and heavily one-sided. The skewed coverage that is produced by embedded media actors is often skewed even more drastically

³⁸ *LGBTQ Nation*, 22 March 2022. See <<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/03/im-transgender-journalist-covering-war-ukraine/>>.

³⁹ 'Media actor' is the non-perjorative term used by the Council of Europe to denote people who are not journalists but are processing information for public dissemination. Council of Europe, 8 March 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/ahCEW>> or <<https://rm.coe.int/compilation-of-coe-standards-relating-to-journalism-in-situations-of-c/1680a5b775>>.

⁴⁰ *Columbia Journalism Review*, 8 February 2016. See <<https://shorturl.at/eIBTY>> or <https://www.cjr.org/first_person/the_ethics_of_embedding_with_do-gooders.php>.

when authorities come to regard non-embedded observers as rogue 'unilaterals' and refuse to cooperate with them.⁴¹ As the Council of Europe has remarked, embedded media actors and journalists have a primary duty to their audiences, rather than to their own military companions:

Journalists should exercise vigilance in covering conflict situations where objective and quality journalism and reporting are key tools in countering propaganda and disinformation.⁴²

That goes for 'media actors', too.

Dylan's deployments

While Sarah Ashton-Cirillo's various roles were still interblending and metamorphosing, a second self-appointed American war correspondent arrived in Ukraine via the Polish border. This was Dylan Burns (born 2001), a middlingly-popular livestreamer who moderated a generally left-wing debate show called Hippy Dippy on the Twitch.tv platform.⁴³ He has 75,000 subscribers on YouTube and 100,000 followers on Twitter. Burns arrived in Warsaw, Poland on 6 April 2022⁴⁴ and the next day travelled some 170 km by road to Lublin in eastern Poland, which he described as a 'city near [the] Polish-Ukrainian border'.⁴⁵ 24 hours after arriving in Lublin, Burns boasted that he had 'so many great interviews here and in Ukraine lined up'. This suggests a further layer of preparedness because travel between Poland (an EU member state) and Ukraine is not frictionless even in peacetime.⁴⁶ Within a fortnight, Burns was pleased to announce that he had secured interviews with 'Polish government officials and refugees [from Ukraine]'.⁴⁷ This was rapid progress indeed for a 21

⁴¹ Pew Research Center, 3 April 2003. See <<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2003/04/03/embedded-reporters/>>.

⁴² Council of Europe, 2022. See note 39 above.

⁴³ A video site similar to YouTube.com but owned by Amazon.com Inc, and specialising in livestreams, i.e. real-time broadcasts.

⁴⁴ Dylan Burns, Twitter.com, 6 April 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/DylanBurns1776/status/1511742165067739142>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/DN7J>>.

⁴⁵ Dylan Burns, Twitter.com, 7 April 2022 See <<https://twitter.com/DylanBurns1776/status/1512009117514158081>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/mCNKP>>.

⁴⁶ Dylan Burns, Twitter.com, 8 April 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/DylanBurns1776/status/1512502086411472906>>. Archived at <<http://archive.is/smeNT>>.

⁴⁷ Dylan Burns, Twitter.com, 21 April 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/DylanBurns1776/status/1518955223162646528>>. Archived at <<http://archive.is/etQc8>>.

year-old YouTuber who didn't speak Polish or Ukrainian (or any other language), had never left America before, and had not even applied for a passport until after Russia had already invaded Ukraine.

Questioned about how he was funding his odyssey, Burns (who had dropped out of college to go to Ukraine) said that the trip was costing him at least 10,000 USD, and perhaps up to 20,000 USD, if his European adventures were to last for about three months. Perhaps coincidentally 'about three months' is how long a US citizen can stay in Ukraine without applying for a visa (90 days).⁴⁸ As of 2024, Dylan Burns is still in Europe, which suggests that he is being funded by an undisclosed source.



Dylan Burns
(Credit: Dronetek)

Burns has inadvertently let slip details that suggest the scale of the operation behind him. On one occasion, he even said that he did not know how he acquired his own Ukrainian press credentials, because an unidentified corporation had completed the bureaucratic requirements on his behalf.

'I don't know how . . . how difficult it is, because I'm not actually accredited [sic] with my YouTube channel . . . *I'm accredited with a separate news organisation to help me along with the paperwork.* I don't know how easy the process would be for a YouTuber to say, like, 'Here's my press outlet, it's my YouTube channel', er, since it's not like considered a traditional press outlet.'⁴⁹ (Emphasis added.)

Burns himself only had a YouTube channel on which to publish his output, which makes his explanation even more dubious. In addition to this undeclared interest, Burns has stated several times that he has been accompanied on some of his excursions around Ukraine by one Patrick Hilsman, to whom Burns refers as 'my friend [. . .] he's done a lot of reporting in Syria, really good guy.'⁵⁰ A political science alumnus of Columbia University, Patrick Hilsman is an

⁴⁸ Ukrainian Visas and Registration guidance, issued by the US Embassy in Ukraine. See <<https://shorturl.at/ckoT9>> or <<https://ua.usembassy.gov/u-s-citizen-services/u-s-citizen-services-faq/ukrainian-visas-registration/>>.

⁴⁹ LazerPig, 'NAFO "Even Rounder" Podcast Ep:2, 'The one where Falcon's internet dies', YouTube.com, 18 June 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/6QsRuaWrsO8>> commencing at 1h 00m 52s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/nafo-even-rounder-podcast-ep-2-the-one-where-falcons-internet-dies>> or <<https://shorturl.at/nwLOQ>>.

⁵⁰ LazerPig 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 1h 05m 27s.

experienced freelance reporter whose work has appeared in *Middle East Eye*, *Haaretz*, and *The Daily Beast*. In December 2023, Hilsman shared a byline with Dylan Burns on an article published by US-based news agency, United Press International (UPI). The story's standfirst stated that Burns and Hilsman 'were given access by the Ukrainian military to interview and photograph troops in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions and filed this report to UPI.'⁵¹

It would appear, then, that UPI is the unidentified news organisation that is providing Burns with his support while in Europe. From that, it would naturally follow that UPI is financing a trip that, in 2022, Burns himself had thought would last a maximum of three months before his money ran out. It is hard to see what value an American online microcelebrity could possibly bring to the output of an internationally-respected news agency. Simultaneously, it is hard to comprehend why a news agency would not disclose the fact that it is providing financial and secretarial support to a rank amateur on a supposedly personal excursion into a war zone.

And Burns is a rank amateur, performing a supervised imitation of news gathering, in the apparent belief that journalism is simply an activity. Burns's commitment to his own imagined profession is perhaps best illustrated by a single anecdote about something that happened while he was drinking a milkshake in a diner in Kherson, south-western Ukraine. As Burns later told it to his fellow guests on a YouTube podcast, he had been scrolling through his phone when he saw a CNN news story about a Russian attack on the very town where he was located.

And I don't really believe it. I'm like, nah. You know? Nah [. . .] So I start leaving the place, we're walking towards the van, and a shell lands about a hundred feet to my left. Um. And another shell lands about a hundred and fifty feet to my right. *So I, thankfully I had my camera on me, I was . . . I held on to my camera a lot while I was down there. Number one, as a comfort item.* (Emphasis added.)⁵²

Burns went on to explain helpfully that:

[I]t's good to have your camera on you at all times, because you never know when it's going to happen. It's never when you expect it, it's always when you don't expect it.

As his enthralled co-stars listened, Burns vividly recalled how events in Kherson

⁵¹ United Press International, 1 December 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/IDKU0>> or <<https://www.upi.com/Voices/2023/12/01/ukraine-inside-ukraine-artillery-war-donetsk-frontline-shortage/4901701288819/>>. NB that UPI refers to Burns as a 'documentary filmmaker'.

⁵² LazerPig, 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 1h 08m 28s.

unfolded:

So I recorded what I could, um, until the shelling got too heavy, because it started hitting the buildings like right next to us. And then we got in the van, and we were trying to get to a safer area. But everywhere we drove would also then start to get shelled, because they were just peppering the entirety of the city centre, at rush hour.⁵³

However, the video of the incident that Burns himself had published shows that, when the nearest shell struck, Burns and his companions had agreed it hit some 600 to 700 feet away.⁵⁴ A second strike occurred while Burns was being driven away, but Burns failed to film it. Burns said at that time that he had no idea how far away the impact was, but he felt it was 'just as close as the last one'.⁵⁵ The video also makes clear that this happened at around midday, not during rush hour. It is not at all clear how hearing the sound of enemy artillery explosions from strikes nearly a quarter of a kilometre away became transformed into the thrilling escapade Burns would later relate.

Earlier on the day of Burns's supposed brush with death, he had visited an abandoned emergency treatment centre. No patients or staff had been injured when the clinic was struck by Russian munitions on 1 August 2022.⁵⁶ When Burns arrived on the scene four weeks later, he interviewed the hospital's former director and filmed himself wandering around on the roof. He had intended to follow up this severely out-of-date coverage with a heartwarming visit to a local dog shelter, where he would be filmed delivering pet food to the grateful animals. However, the dog shelter visit was called off as a result of Burns's milkshake being targeted by Russian artillery.

United Press International was approached and asked to explain its apparent relationship with Dylan Burns. UPI was also asked about the ethical implications of working with someone who is officially affiliated with a propaganda arm of the Ukrainian government. UPI declined to comment.

Apart from being propaganda-mongers for the Ukrainian government, Ashton-Cirillo and Burns had something else in common. Each had what might reasonably be called a deep state background.

⁵³ LazerPig, 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 1h 09m 14s.

⁵⁴ Dylan Burns, 'I Got Shelled by the Russian Army', YouTube, 13 November 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/6UfcgWfzbS8>> commencing at 9m 48s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/i-got-shelled-by-the-russian-army-1080p>>.

⁵⁵ Dylan Burns, 13 November 2022. See note 54 above. Commencing at 11m 48s.

⁵⁶ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 1 August 2022. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/08/1/7361284/>>.

Burns had been involved in Democratic Party politics while still a teenager, and worked as Maryland director of Senator Mike Gravel's abortive presidential campaign in 2019. Senator Gravel (b. 1930; d. 2021) was a former army counter-intelligence officer, who in 1971 had played a crucial role in the leak of the Pentagon Papers.⁵⁷ Burns described Gravel's firm political principles as a personal inspiration. Burns's deputy campaign director was another young Democrat activist, who was on probation at the time, having been convicted of wiretapping for covertly broadcasting a livestream from a Republican opponent's office.⁵⁸

With Gravel's imprimatur, Burns went on to act as foreign policy advisor for the ultimately unsuccessful Congressional campaign of Maryland candidate McKayla Wilkes, whom Gravel had personally endorsed.⁵⁹ Burns has repeatedly mocked online claims that he is in Ukraine on behalf of the CIA, but his strange semi-detached working relationship with the UPI news agency means that there is something underhand going on. Whatever it is, Burns himself might not even be fully aware of it.

Like Dylan Burns, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo is a Democratic Party activist and registered party voter. While living in Nevada in 2020, under the name Sarah Cirillo, she infiltrated the Republican Party's local opposition research team. Using her new political cover, she then expanded her infiltration to the far-right Proud Boys movement, prior to the abortive insurrection in Washington DC on 6 January 2021.⁶⁰ Her alibi for this prolonged deception and double-dealing was that she was conducting research for a book she intended to write, about the links between the Republican Party and far-right extremists. No such book was ever published, but Ashton-Cirillo succeeded in fracturing links between the Proud Boys and the local Republican Party by publicly leaking private messages she had exchanged with the former.

In March 2021, she changed her legal name to Sarah Ashton-Cirillo but started using the name Sarah Ashton instead, which may have been an attempt to distance herself from online media coverage of her previous exploits. In

⁵⁷ *Columbia Magazine*, 20 June 2021. See <<https://magazine.columbia.edu/article/lonely-senator>>.

⁵⁸ WMDT, 21 March 2019. See <<https://www.wmdt.com/2019/03/student-charged-with-wiretapping-to-get-probation/>>.

⁵⁹ Salon.com, 26 December 2019. See <<https://shorturl.at/gEOZ1>> or <<https://www.salon.com/2019/12/26/meet-the-young-progressive-trying-to-take-out-house-majority-leader-steny-hoyer/>>.

⁶⁰ *Nevada Current*, 27 May 2021. See <<https://shorturl.at/gMQ45>> or <<https://nevadacurrent.com/2021/05/27/consultants-for-nv-gop-sought-out-proud-boys-for-post-election-rally/>>.

Summer 2021, she ran for election to Las Vegas Council, misleadingly representing herself as 'Sarah Ashton'.⁶¹ During the election campaign period, Ashton-Cirillo handed the FBI damaging private material she had obtained about her Republican rival.⁶² Shortly before upping sticks and dashing halfway round the world to Ukraine, Ashton-Cirillo sabotaged another local Republican by leaking the contents of personal emails.⁶³ In Ukraine, Ashton-Cirillo described herself as a 'recovering political operative'.⁶⁴ While in Ukraine, Ashton-Cirillo also filed stories about Republican Party politicians in her home state of Nevada, including a scathing opinion piece about the Republican rival whose information Ashton-Cirillo had leaked to the FBI the previous year.⁶⁵ Her vociferous and aggressive behaviour, in support of a foreign war backed by a US President from the Democratic Party, suggests that far from being a recovering political operative, Ashton-Cirillo was very much an addicted one.

While masquerading as a journalist in Ukraine, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo started promoting a fictitious pseudo-prosecutorial case against Gonzalo Lira. During his detention by the SBU from 16 to 22 April 2022, but before his whereabouts became publicly known, Ashton-Cirillo denounced Lira repeatedly and imputed criminal offences to him.

The onslaught began barely 48 hours after Lira's seeming disappearance. Ashton-Cirillo deliberately misrepresented his silence as cowardice, stating 'Gonzalo Lira has still not spoken up to defend his Russian propaganda'.⁶⁶ She claimed several times that he was a conscious 'Russian propagandist',⁶⁷ a

⁶¹ ElectSarah.com. Website deleted, archive only. See capture dated 03 June 2021.

⁶² *Nevada Current*, 15 July 2021. See <<https://shorturl.at/hjvEO>> or <<https://nevadacurrent.com/briefs/fbi-reviewing-copious-amounts-of-info-on-fiore-provided-by-opponent/>>.

⁶³ *Political Tips*, 17 January 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/jorC2>> or <<https://www.political.tips/post/as-nevada-leo-hack-exposes-pretty-eric-garner-killing-chattah-text-calls-for-ford-hanging-more>> (page now deleted, archive only). NB that *Political Tips* is maintained by Ashton-Cirillo herself.

⁶⁴ *LGBTQ Nation* profile. See <<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/author/sarah-ashton-cirillo/>>.

⁶⁵ *LGBTQ Nation*, 13 June 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/esGJR>> or <<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/06/gop-candidate-michele-fiore-doesnt-hate-lgbtq-community-just-hates/>>.

⁶⁶ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 18 April 2022, See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1516133207531479057>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/HaIF8>>.

⁶⁷ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 18 April 2022, See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1516116443691200512>>. Archived at <<http://archive.is/qLh6C>>.

'Russian asset', and 'a malicious actor'⁶⁸ who was in some unspecified way 'responsible for the deaths of civilians and the destruction of Ukraine'.⁶⁹ She specifically stated, with no evidence, that 'Lira's misinformation has led to the deaths of both civilians and soldiers'.⁷⁰

But when Scott Ritter mistakenly announced that Gonzalo Lira had been kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by Ukrainian special forces (see page 37 above), Ashton-Cirillo suddenly demonstrated exclusive inside knowledge. She announced that 'Scott Ritter is wrong. Gonzalo Lira is still alive.'⁷¹

Ashton-Cirillo has never acknowledged the fact that her claim that Lira was keeping quiet out of cowardice was untrue. Nor, more importantly, that she was conducting a personalised propaganda campaign against a captive civilian compatriot, who had not officially been charged with anything. Ashton-Cirillo's conduct, in the setting of military conflict in a country under martial law, was extremely dangerous. If a journalist had published such bogus inquisitorial narratives to an international audience, they would have been in flagrant and serious violation of their own professional ethics.

The Ukrainian military was asked to explain why Ashton-Cirillo had made numerous false accusations against Lira. A spokesman refused to comment

Ashton-Cirillo's behaviour in Ukraine was so conspicuously outrageous that, in September 2023, US Senator J. D. Vance (Republican; Ohio) wrote to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, seeking clarification of what was going on.

Sen. Vance asked: 'Is this individual an American citizen? Did they ever serve, in any capacity, American intelligence services?' and 'Do we have reason to believe Ukrainian forces or intelligence services are planning to commit acts of violence against those who engage in "Russian propaganda"?'

Senator Vance's letter concluded:

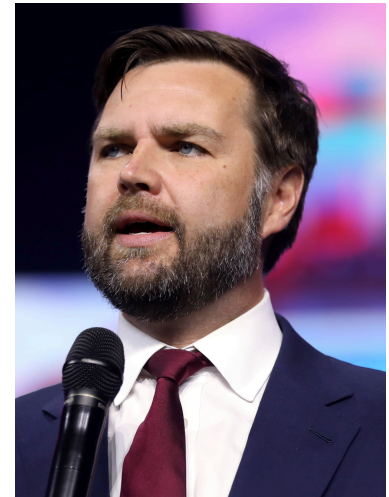
⁶⁸ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 22 April 2022, See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1517085342922387456>>. Archived at <<http://archive.is/XjHij>>.

⁶⁹ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 18 April 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1516097433851289604>>. Archived at <<http://archive.is/8saeT>>.

⁷⁰ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 18 April 2022, See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1516350186569678850>>. Archived at <<http://archive.is/T30LM>>.

⁷¹ 20 April 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1516885136641609730>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/bawAJ>>.

I worry American resources could be supporting violence or the threat of violence against people for speaking their mind. Notably, any critic of America's incoherent policy in Ukraine has been slandered as a propagandist, including multiple presidential candidates and American journalists. While we can debate the merits of these accusations, engaging in protected speech should not invite threats of violence—otherwise, the First Amendment means nothing.⁷²



J. D. Vance
(credit: Gage Skidmore)

Senator Vance's office was contacted in May 2024, but declined to comment when asked whether Austin, Biden, or Haines had ever responded to his letter. He also declined to comment on Lira's ordeals in Ukrainian captivity.

The Ukrainian military was asked whether Ashton-Cirillo is attached to any branch of US intelligence. A spokesman refused to comment.

With Lira released on bail (22 April 2022) Ashton-Cirillo's campaign to discredit him took a new and even more dangerous direction. As well as supposedly being a Russian agent and propagandist whose actions had led to civilian and military deaths, Lira was now alleged to be a turncoat and a traitor to his own cause. Ashton-Cirillo told the world that Lira, whom she had already branded 'a Russian agent', had also become an informant for the Ukrainian SBU. Ashton-Cirillo must have known the two accusations would together put Lira at increased risk from partisans of both Russia and Ukraine. On 1 May 2022, it was reported that a group of Russian operatives had been arrested in Kharkiv. Later that day, Ashton-Cirillo announced '[Gonzalo Lira] is a rat. He flipped.'⁷³ A few minutes after that, she remarked of one arrestee: 'It's one of the people Lira snitched on after he was released by SBU.'⁷⁴ Ashton-Cirillo re-emphasised the allegation 48 hours later, stating unequivocally that: 'Gonzalo Lira has become

⁷² Senator James D. Vance, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo letter, 15 September 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/ejs34>> or <<https://www.vance.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/9.15.2023-Sarah-Ashton-Cirillo-Letter.pdf>>.

⁷³ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 1 May 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1520799626378584064>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/s0GXN>>.

⁷⁴ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 1 May 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1520800966437707779>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/NeHzR>>.

an informant. Fact.⁷⁵ It should be self-evident that the SBU would have nothing to gain by exposing any useful informant, and potentially a lot to lose.



Gonzalo Lira, May 2022

Ashton-Cirillo continued sniping at Lira in this manner for the next two months, developing her theme by insisting that Lira was no longer living in Kharkiv. Lira, who was also active on Twitter at the time, did not respond to Ashton-Cirillo or react to her provocations. Without a regular supply of fuel for her diatribes, Ashton-Cirillo eventually ran out of steam. On 10 July 2022, she dismissed Lira as 'a larper'⁷⁶ and then abruptly stopped talking about him.

Three weeks later, a very similar, but even more pernicious, online operation began to take shape. Again, it was an 'information space' campaign, conducted across the same social media forums that Lira used. This operation was totally open about its aims, albeit belatedly, and was spearheaded by a man with a professed background in military intelligence. Like Ashton-Cirillo, this individual – along with various associates – worked in formal affiliation with a propaganda arm of the Ukrainian government.

V: The dogs of war

You have to recognise that, you should tell people, that so much of the social media content that they are getting, that is popping up on their feeds or what-have-you It's deliberately done. No different to what was going on on Twitter. They are deliberately shadowbanning people so that only the approved narrative gets through to the majority of people. And the dissident voices? They get relegated to the margins.⁷⁷

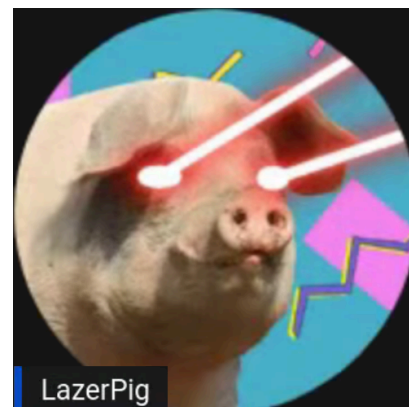
David Steel (born 1989) is a YouTuber with just under 400,000 subscribers, and

⁷⁵ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 1 May 2022. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1521412303371051009>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/ID3JB>>.

⁷⁶ Live-Action Role Player, in other words someone performing an actor-like role in a non-theatrical setting. A familiar example is that of participating in a modern re-enactment of a historic event, such as the Battle of Waterloo. Or, more pertinently, pretending to be a war correspondent in Ukraine.

⁷⁷ Gonzalo Lira, 'YouTube also shadowbans the truth', YouTube.com, 11 December 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/mzQMVgxSEms>> commencing at 10m 31s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/you-tube-also-shadowbans-the-truth>>.

almost 40,000 Twitter followers. He has a strong west of Scotland accent, and purportedly lives in Spain. He also claims to have a background in British military intelligence, specifically as a producer of studies of mass psychology, which he has described as: 'Nothing fancy. I wasn't a double agent or . . . whatever. My job was to predict civilian response [sic] to hypothetical scenarios.'⁷⁸ While Steel tells demonstrable and damaging lies whenever it suits him, his behaviour toward Gonzalo Lira strongly resembles a successful psychological operation. Steel goes by the online *nom de guerre* 'LazerPig' and that is how he will be referred to hereinafter.



On 16 July 2022, in addition to his personal videos, Gonzalo Lira introduced a regular format that he named the Roundtable. This was an open-ended and mostly unmoderated topical debate with an ever-changing roster of guests, some of whom were fairly distinguished. Lira disclosed that one of his motivations for setting up his Roundtables was that each scheduled broadcast served as a form of 'insurance Because if I don't show up for a show, then people will know something happened.'⁷⁹

On 31 July 2022, LazerPig published a video called 'The Gonzalo Lira Roundtable do not know what they are talking about', which he said people had been asking him to produce. It was an hour of rambling splenetic solo commentary on episode three of Lira's Roundtable series, which had been livestreamed 10 days earlier.⁸⁰ The three Roundtable guests were mocked savagely for their perceived lack of military insight, and for repeating narratives that LazerPig said they had absorbed directly from Russian propaganda. Each guest was described as an idiot or a liar. While delivering his withering monologue, LazerPig repeatedly explained to his viewers why Russia's invasion would not succeed and how Ukraine would ultimately triumph. LazerPig's counterblast to Lira got over one million views. As a result of this video, and subsequent provocations, Lira eventually contacted LazerPig to invite him onto the Roundtable show. The ensuing livestream was a disaster for Lira – mostly of

⁷⁸ LazerPig, 'The Gonzalo Lira Roundtable do not know what they are talking about', YouTube.com, 31 July 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/mz13IPUVBUI>> commencing at 38m 07s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/lazer-pig-31-july-2022>>.

⁷⁹ Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1, of part 1. Commencing at 39m 48s.

⁸⁰ Gonzalo Lira, 'Roundtable #3: Armchair Warlord, History Legends, The New Atlas', YouTube, 21 July 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/eOEgLFJ6eu8>>. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-roundtable-3>>.

his own making.⁸¹

Lira had prepared a sort of slideshow presentation, in which his guests – LazerPig and another YouTube celebrity known as ‘Destiny’ (real name Stephen Borrell, born 1988) – were meant to choose between true and false statements about the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the conduct of the Ukrainian government. The object of this exercise, Lira explained, was to see whether his guests were ‘ignorant or evil’. When this unwinnable gameshow-like format became clear to Destiny, he said he wasn’t going to go along with it. He disconnected from the livestream, leaving Lira and LazerPig head-to-head. Things went downhill from there, and when it got to the stage where LazerPig (by his own admission, very drunkenly) started asking Lira what sort of tree he would choose to be, Lira pulled the plug on the whole broadcast. He would have been wiser not to have started it in the first place.

While planning the episode, Lira had made it very clear, repeatedly and in public, that he was seeking pro-NATO guests. He had contacted LazerPig on this basis, which was repeated at least twice in private message exchanges between the two men.⁸² LazerPig did not seek to modify or correct this understanding until the live broadcast had already started, when he suddenly announced that he was not pro-NATO but simply pro-Ukraine, and refused to move from that debating position. He had tricked his way into the show, and it is unclear why Lira did not immediately challenge him for this fundamental deception.

Four days after sabotaging Lira’s Roundtable, LazerPig uploaded a video to his YouTube channel,⁸³ in which he explained that he had deliberately set out to make Lira lose his temper and discredit himself. In particular, LazerPig gloated that he had provoked Lira by repeatedly using a needle-word, ‘morbid’, claiming he ‘knew saying the word “morbid” would trigger [Lira] . . . and it did.’ It had worked because it was a cruel reminder of Lira’s own heart condition, which Lira had already disclosed and which he knew had shortened his life expectancy.

Because for all the time he spent laying a trap for me, I was laying a little trap for him. And that was simply to trigger him [. . .] He is front and centre of this argument. [. . .] He is well-known and well-respected

⁸¹ Gonzalo Lira, ‘The Roundtable #40: Talking to NATO Supporters Destiny and LazerPig’, YouTube, 10 January 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/ourA3GVrILQ>>/ Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-roundtable-40>>.

⁸² Gonzalo Lira, Twitter.com, 10 January 2023. See <<https://twitter.com/GonzaloLira1968/status/1612911784121499650>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/yQ8Se>>.

⁸³ At the time of this essay’s publication, this video has been watched by approximately half a million people.

in the pro-Russia crowd. And when he activated my fucking trap card,⁸⁴ he showed to his audience, to anyone who was on the fence, that he doesn't have an argument.⁸⁵

In a subsequent video, uploaded the following month, LazerPig would reveal more details of how he set out to sabotage Lira's Roundtable. He had engaged a secret back-up team, which he referred to as NAFO, using a separate social media platform called Discord. These people were supplying LazerPig with information in order to effectively tackle Lira's arguments.

I had notes prepared. I had like everything that I thought he was going to ask me, I had responses to it all and everything. And I had like NAFO giving me, like, like, heads-up on everything. Everything that he said that I didn't have an answer to, NAFO were sitting there in a private Discord, just feeding me answers, and potentially what he might say and everything, and like articles that I could reference and things.⁸⁶

Later, dissecting the Roundtable fiasco, Dylan Burns played back a recording of the show that included private 'backstage' comments made by the guests, that had not been audible to Lira during the broadcast. Destiny – Lira's other guest on the show – can clearly be heard asking unidentified others to perform some rapid research on a website that Lira mentioned.⁸⁷ Since LazerPig had already admitted to having a NAFO backup team on hand, the inference is that NAFO was also assisting Destiny. The upshot of all this is that Dylan Burns was 'in on the secret' and that his recording of the Roundtable had come directly from one of the participants, with whom Burns was effectively colluding.⁸⁸

NAFO

NAFO is the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation, a somewhat shadowy troll army that patrols the figurative landscape of social media. Its members identify themselves with customised profile pictures of Shiba Inu dogs, a breed which is

⁸⁴ A reference to a tactic in the card game *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, based on a Japanese comic book series of the same name.

⁸⁵ LazerPig, 'The Gonzalo Lira Roundtable - My thoughts', YouTube.com, 14 January 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/Y9dZpbKTLJ0>> commencing at 11m 10s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/lazer-pig-14-january-2023>>.

⁸⁶ LazerPig, 'NAFO "Even Rounder"' Podcast Ep:0 The one with awful audio', YouTube.com, 26 February 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/k1YvAVtoZ64>> commencing at 1h 17m 03s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/nafo-even-rounder-podcast-ep-0-the-one-with-awful-audio>>.

⁸⁷ Relative to Lira's original Roundtable (see note 81 above) this crosstalk occurs at 8m 19s.

⁸⁸ Dylan Burns, 'Destiny and Lazerpig Embarrass Gonzalo Lira in Ukraine Debate', YouTube 13 January 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/NtqJncBfX-4>> with the crosstalk commencing at 18m 35s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/dylan-burns-13-january-2023>>.

popular in online memetic humour.⁸⁹ NAFO mostly consists of ordinary members of the public, who earnestly perform their self-appointed roles in the information war by deliberately making a nuisance of themselves on the internet.

The main objective of this laboriously whimsical witch-hunt is to attack and undermine 'Vatniks', this word denoting people suspected of harbouring Russian sympathies or of actually working for Russia itself. In theory, NAFO is a kind of crowd-sourced counter-propaganda operation. In practice, the amateurish zealotry of some NAFO operatives can lead to exaggerated or outright false accusations, harassment, and indirect censorship, attempted via malicious reports to website content moderators. Apart from its online trolling, NAFO has more positive projects. Members raise money from the public, to buy equipment for the Ukrainian army.



As the name suggests, NAFO is a pro-NATO operation. In July 2023, NAFO members somehow managed to obtain clearance to hold a fan convention in a hotel in Vilnius, Lithuania, while the NATO summit was taking place in the same city.⁹⁰ The 2023 NATO summit saw Vilnius largely closed down while the leaders of 40 countries gathered there, protected by 1,000 troops, an air defence force, and missile batteries, with residents advised to leave the city if possible to avoid the disruption.⁹¹ The nearby NAFO fan convention was opened in person by Lithuania's Foreign Affairs Minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis,⁹² which probably means the event's 200 attendees all underwent security vetting first. How they even managed to afford to block book the hotel in the first place remains unclear.

⁸⁹ For an explanation, see the 'Doge' article published by Know Your Meme, 24 July 2013, at <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doge>>.

⁹⁰ The fan convention was livestreamed by Mark Adam Harold, YouTube.com, 8 July 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/nADl1rj8tWM>>. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/nafo-fan-convention-2023>>.

⁹¹ Vilnius City Council, 29 May 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/bkyKW>> or <<https://vilnius.lt/en/2023/05/29/ahead-of-the-nato-summit-in-vilnius-what-vilnius-residents-and-visitors-need-to-know/>>.

⁹² Mark Adam Harold, 8 July 2023. See note 90 above, commencing at 1h 32m 45s. (In archive, commencing at 3m 20s.)

The prime minister of Estonia, Kaja Kallas, was busy attending the NATO summit as the head of her country's delegation, but also gave a short pre-recorded address to the fan convention. Commencing at 1h 40m 10s. (In archive, 10m 48s.)

NAFO was approached in July 2024 and asked how and when NAFO members began working with LazerPig, and at whose instigation. NAFO was also asked to comment on how they funded the July 2023 fan conference in Vilnius, and how they obtained clearance to convene in such a high-security area. NAFO declined to comment on each issue.

Around a fortnight after wrecking Lira's Roundtable livestream, LazerPig appeared on another livestream, ostensibly about military history and related topics, on the Twitch.tv platform. This show was not one that LazerPig would set out to disrupt, because he and the host, DigitalVagrant, shared a deep antipathy to Gonzalo Lira. LazerPig and DigitalVagrant celebrated the way that LazerPig had 'ruined [Lira's] life' by losing him supporters and subscribers, and claimed that viewing figures for Lira's subsequent videos had 'tanked by, like, half'.⁹³ LazerPig used this guest appearance to open a second front of his psychological operation, launching an elaborate personal smear against Lira. Referring to Lira's detention by the SBU in 2022, LazerPig told his new audience that:

OK. . . what he was doing . . . he was arrested because of . . . he was potentially . . . he was *potentially* spying . . . they *thought* he was a spy . . . because *what he was doing was running round Kharkiv taking pictures* of Ukrainian positions and Ukrainian troops and everything, and *it turns out he was being paid* . . . to take pictures of Ukrainian artillery positions and mortar positions [. . .] by the Russians. (Emphases added.)⁹⁴

LazerPig's yarn was apparently spun from Lira's own off-handed remark that he had considered photographing members of the Azov battalion manning a recruitment stand on a Kyiv street.⁹⁵ No evidence has ever been offered for the unlikely assertion that Lira was conducting reconnaissance for the Russian invaders. Nevertheless, this phantom allegation has proved remarkably persistent, thanks to constant repetition by Lira's critics and opponents. Destiny (who had been LazerPig's co-panellist in Lira's abortive Roundtable, see pages 53 and 54 above) later repeated LazerPig's assertion almost verbatim. Like most of the people repeating these stories, Destiny did so in equivocal terms, spreading misinformation without explicitly endorsing it.

Wasn't it the case that he [Lira] was . . . was he colluding with Russia, or

⁹³ DigitalVagrant, 'After Hours | Military History Nonsense w/ Lazerpig', YouTube.com, 27 January 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/6nHVwURSXJA>> commencing at 13m 00s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/digitalvagrant-27-january-2023-720px-25fps>>.

⁹⁴ DigitalVagrant, 27 January 2023. See note 93 above. Commencing at 1h 55m 40s.

⁹⁵ Lira, 03 March 2022. See note 19 above. Commencing at 1h 05m 40s.

was that just a rumour? That *he was running around taking pictures?* I, I read that somewhere, but I don't know whether that was actually verified or not. I'm not sure. [. . .] *Wasn't he told to leave or get deported?* I feel like I heard that but I'm not sure [. . .] I mean, I just don't know, I read a lot of, I don't know, like, whether that's been confirmed or not. (Emphases added.)

These comments were made during a livestream on 6 May 2023 that has since been deleted. Destiny uploaded a clip from the deleted livestream, to his own YouTube channel, but for some reason edited out the bit where he had repeated LazerPig's allegations.⁹⁶ However, later in May another YouTube user uploaded an excerpt from the deleted livestream, which contained the missing material.⁹⁷ Juxtaposing the two excerpts published on YouTube verifies the authenticity and continuity of the material that Destiny had deleted, including his spreading of the LazerPig misinformation.⁹⁸

Destiny is not a nobody. He is one of the biggest 'stars' of the online commentariat. His main YouTube channel has almost 750,000 subscribers, his Twitter account has 164,000 followers, and his TikTok account has 150,000 fans. He is therefore an important amplifier for any material that he cares to disseminate. Destiny and Gonzalo Lira were political opposites and long-standing enemies, who had argued furiously on social media for many years prior to Lira's arrest. It is not, therefore, inconceivable that Destiny might have become co-opted and peripherally involved in an operation against Lira without fully understanding the situation. His rapid dissembling about the source of his information (including whether he had heard it or read it) suggests that he was aware of what he was doing when he repeated LazerPig's misinformation.



Destiny (Stephen Borrell)
(Credit: Gonzalo Lira)

Destiny was approached in July 2024 and asked how and why he had become involved with LazerPig and NAFO, and at whose instigation. He was also

⁹⁶ Destiny, 'Destiny Reacts To Coach Redpill Getting Arrested For Russian Propaganda, Debates Viewers On It', YouTube.com, 7 May 2023. See <https://youtu.be/avWCbnS_0aA> with the edit point visible at 1 minute and 22 seconds. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/destiny-reacts-to-gonzalo-lira-arrest-may-2023>>.

⁹⁷ This unofficial clip has since been deleted from YouTube. It is archived at <<https://archive.org/details/destiny-reacts-to-gonzalo-lira-arrest-may-2023-deleted-clip>> with the remarks about Lira commencing at 1m 07s.

⁹⁸ See <<https://archive.org/details/destiny-reloaded>>.

asked why he had repeated LazerPig's false claims about Lira. Finally, Destiny was asked for his views on the possibility that he had unwittingly participated in a formal psychological operation on behalf of the Ukrainian government. Destiny declined to comment on each issue

LazerPig's smear was also repeated by Dylan Burns, who (like Destiny) couched it as a rumour in order to avoid endorsing it outright:

I remember there were rumours of [Lira], like, taking pictures of Russian positions, [sic] and possibly sharing that, and turning in other people . . . uh . . . uh . . . still rumours, right? ⁹⁹

On the DigitalVagrant show, LazerPig told his host that he (plus unspecified others, presumably implying members of NAFO) had spoken to the Ukrainian SBU in an attempt to get hold of video footage of Lira's interrogation. Unsurprisingly, such footage was not forthcoming, but LazerPig had a far more exciting story to tell, which he attributed to the SBU. LazerPig informed the audience that Lira had broken down under questioning and betrayed five Russian agents in the Kharkiv area, in an attempt to establish a plea bargain and thereby avoid a life sentence in a Ukrainian prison.

This scenario almost replicated the claims that Sarah Ashton-Cirillo had made in July 2022 (page 48 above). LazerPig went further, describing how Lira had become mentally ill while on bail and under house arrest, and had ultimately begged to be deported. The sympathetic SBU officers had supposedly escorted Lira to the border, generously buying him a coffee and a sandwich on the way, and dropped him off in Poland.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, LazerPig asserted, Lira was no longer living in Ukraine and his videos and livestreams were audacious hoaxes. LazerPig boasted that he knew 'exactly where [Lira] is', and that Lira was really living in the Netherlands, or perhaps in Vienna.¹⁰¹

LazerPig's story had the desired effect. The original DigitalVagrant livestream on the Twitch platform¹⁰² got fewer than 2,000 viewers, but a recording of the original broadcast was later uploaded to YouTube and attracted just under 200,000. In the comments section below the published YouTube video, one user said they were 'not shocked in the slightest that [Lira] was a spy', a remark which earned 720 'likes' (upvotes) from other users. One reply to

⁹⁹ Dylan Burns, 'Gonzalo Lira ARRESTED by Ukrainian SBU for Russian Propaganda', YouTube.com, 06 May 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/EX1C04AZE7E>> commencing at 22m 11s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/dylan-burns-live-06-may-2023>>.

¹⁰⁰ DigitalVagrant, 27 January 2023. See note 93 above. Commencing at 1h 55m 20s.

¹⁰¹ DigitalVagrant, 27 January 2023. See note 93 above. Commencing at 1h 54m 04s.

¹⁰² DigitalVagrant, Twitch.tv, undated. See <<https://www.twitch.tv/videos/1718553558>>.

that comment said: 'I always thought something was off with [Lira], thought he was either slightly unhinged or had something against NATO. Turns out it was both', and received 106 likes. A second commenter got 145 likes for saying simply: 'So Gonzalo Lira is actually a Russian spy. Holy Moly.'

But not one word of it was true, as was eventually demonstrated when Lira was arrested in Ukraine on 1 May 2023. With Lira in pre-trial custody, LazerPig made another appearance on DigitalVagrant's show, on 9 May 2023. This broadcast – viewed by 376,000 people – was intended to be satirical live commentary on Russia's Victory Day Parade, but predictably degenerated into drunken self-indulgence. Amid the collective jubilation at Lira's arrest, LazerPig mounted an improvised rearguard action to preserve his own credibility. The task facing LazerPig was to explain how Lira could possibly have been rearrested in Ukraine if (as LazerPig had claimed in January) he had really been secretly deported and was living in the Netherlands (or Vienna). LazerPig's attempt to reconcile the known facts with his own lies was shambolic and self-evidently unsuccessful, but his associates either didn't notice or didn't care:

The police said that they put him on the train, we don't know whether they went on the train with him and escorted him to the border, or they put him on the train and he got off at the next station and walked back. We don't know.¹⁰³

Lira had been arrested at his apartment in Kharkiv, by a team of armed SBU officers.¹⁰⁴ He was charged with two offences under Article 436-2 of the Ukrainian criminal code, This law had been introduced by the Zelensky government in March 2022, and deals specifically with the Russian invasion that had begun the previous month. It prohibits: 'Rejustification, recognition as legitimate, denial of the armed aggression of the Russia Federation against Ukraine, the glorification of its participants.' (For good measure, the SBU's announcement repeated LazerPig's canard about Lira taking photographs of Ukrainian military positions. Neither of the



Lira arrested at apartment

¹⁰³ DigitalVagrant, 'Putin's Victory Day Debacle', YouTube.com, 12 May 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/a1tCP8gZZAc>> commencing at 6m 21s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/putin-s-victory-day-debacle-nafo-reacts-09-may-2023-720px>>.

¹⁰⁴ SBU statement, Telegram (social media platform) 5 May 2023. See <<https://t.me/SBUkr/8224>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/JxENG>> (source in Ukrainian).

formal charges against Lira included that allegation.)

The first charge against Lira fell under Part Two of that Article, 'Justifying the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, launched in 2014.'¹⁰⁵ The maximum sentencing option for such offences is three years in prison. The second charge against Lira fell under Part Three of the Article: 'recognition of this [Russian] aggression as legitimate'. The maximum sentencing option for such offences is eight years in prison and confiscation of personal assets.¹⁰⁶

Neither of the two charges against Lira was inherently espionage-related. An illustrative case is that of Dmytro Korniychuk, a resident of Kyiv, who (like Lira) was arrested on suspicion of offences under Parts 2 and 3 of Article 436-2. Korniychuk's offences were committed purely by publishing social media posts, including videos.¹⁰⁷

The same charges have also been brought against many other people for actions that were, on the face of it, relatively innocuous. The biggest factor in this dragnet effect is the lack of legal definitions of the terms 'justification' and 'glorification', which allows courts to interpret those particular words very loosely. The ways in which such 'propaganda of war' can be manufactured or promulgated are totally undefined. This has led to prison sentences for Ukrainians who simply gave likes or upvotes to material on social media, which can make the material visible to their online friends and followers. A review of the implementation of Article 436-2 was conducted by the Kharkiv Human Rights Group in October 2023 (so, 18 months after the law took effect) and found that around 2,500 offences had been recorded using the standards of the new law. Nearly every offence brought before a court resulted in conviction.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, with Lira silenced again, his enemies exulted in convicting him pre-judicially in a trial by social media. Sarah Ashton-Cirillo published a

¹⁰⁵ The proviso 'launched in 2014' attempts, unconvincingly, to backdate the Russian invasion by nine years. 2014 is when the Donbas oblasts attempted to secede from Ukraine and Russia annexed Crimea, in the immediate aftermath of the coup that deposed president Yanukovich.

¹⁰⁶ Centre for Political and Legal Reforms, 29 April 2022. See <<https://shorturl.at/fsFK0>> or <<https://pravo.org.ua/blogs/vypravdovuvannya-zbrojnoyi-agresiyi-rf-proty-ukrayiny-kryminalna-vidpovidalnist/>> (source in Ukrainian). Whether any resulting sentences would have been imposed consecutively or concurrently is unclear.

¹⁰⁷ *Front News Ukraine*, 20 February 2024. See <<https://frontnews.eu/en/news/details/74923>>.

¹⁰⁸ After the new law took effect in March 2022, the remaining nine months of the year saw 513 trials resulting in 506 convictions. In 533 trials between January 2023 and October the same year, 530 resulted in a conviction. Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 30 October 2023. See <<https://khp.org/1608812978>> (source in Ukrainian).

celebratory video in which she announced that Gonzalo Lira was 'a Russian propagandist. An agent . . . of Vladimir Putin's lies', deliberately pausing for nearly two seconds after the word 'agent', to give the impression that Lira had been an intelligence operative. She went on to state that Ukraine would violate the borders of other countries in pursuit of alleged Russian agents:¹⁰⁹

Ultimately, justice caught up with him. Just like justice is going to catch up to every Russian agent, terrorist, war criminal, and propagandist, across the world.¹¹⁰



Ashton-Cirillo's video
May 2023

Later, Ashton-Cirillo published a photograph of Lira sitting dejectedly in a court room. She commented 'Gonzalo Lira had *apparently* just signed his guilty plea when this photograph was taken.' (Emphasis added.)¹¹¹ Her weasel wording didn't quite commit her to her own claim, which she knew was untrue. Ashton-Cirillo had taken the photograph herself, and had observed the situation first-hand. There is no need for a trial if a defendant has pleaded guilty, and such a defendant typically receives an expedited but much-reduced sentence for their candour and penitence. The effect of Ashton-Cirillo's untruthful pre-trial comments was to convict Lira in the public mind as soon as he had been arrested. The reality was clarified when the Ukrainian authorities proceeded to set court dates for Lira's defence case, in a series of hearings that were still in progress as the year drew to a close seven months later. Ashton-Cirillo herself acknowledged Lira's ongoing defence case in a later video,¹¹² but has never addressed her earlier falsehoods about the 'guilty' plea.

Ashton-Cirillo also claimed that Lira had been arrested thanks to

¹⁰⁹ This outburst was what prompted the inquiries from US Sen J. D. Vance, discussed on page 19 above.

¹¹⁰ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 5 May 2023, See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1654496248282464258>> Archived at <<<https://archive.ph/JqYcy>>> Video archived at <<https://archive.org/details/sarah-ashton-cirillo-05-may-2023>>.

¹¹¹ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 05 May 2023. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1654557930774056960>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/Dz3zC>>.

¹¹² Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 12 September 2023. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1701564358189277380>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/zZ3wQ>>. Video archived at <<https://archive.org/details/sarah-ashton-cirillo-12-september-2023>>.

information supplied by the 'Donbas Devushka'. Lira had openly communicated with this person, but quite how she could have had gathered any incriminating evidence about him is unknown. The Donbas Devushka was a pro-Russian social media commenter, who eventually turned out to be Sarah Bils, a former US Navy officer with top secret security clearance, living in Washington State. There has never been any official explanation for Bils's bizarre stunt, and Russian authorities dismissed it as a psychological operation.¹¹³

Separately, Dylan Burns was mocking Lira's predicament on his own YouTube channel. Burns presented his viewers with an excerpt from the Ukrainian law under which Lira was being prosecuted. Burns told his audience: 'Sorry that I did not have the entire Ukrainian criminal code in perfect English, perfectly translated, on hand when the story dropped [. . .] I had to have it basically translated online.' Despite not being able to read the original himself, Burns was able to assure viewers that one specific detail in the translation was inaccurate. Conveniently enough, Burns's so-called correction cast the Ukrainian penal system in a more positive light. The translated text said that the offence with which Lira was charged was 'punishable by correctional labour'. But according to Burns:

This is a translation error that makes it sound like he's about to be sent to a gulag. He is not about to be sent to a gulag. While that would be funny, pretty funny, that would also be very unethical. Um. And what that is supposed to actually mean is that they can like take certain items of his property.¹¹⁴

This is further evidence that Burns was being manipulated by someone in Ukraine. If Burns couldn't read the original, and 'punishable by correctional labour' was an error produced by translation software, then *ipso facto* Burns was being prompted by someone who could speak both Ukrainian and English. But it wasn't an error produced by translation software, so either Burns was lying or he had been deliberately misinformed by someone else. While the Soviet-era gulag system obviously no longer exists, Ukrainian sentencing law still contains provision for prisoners to be compelled to undertake modern forms of correctional labour. This sanction was applicable to the charges against Gonzalo Lira.

Both Ashton-Cirillo and Burns were particularly keen to scotch online claims that Lira was a journalist. This idea had proliferated among social media users,

¹¹³ US Naval Institute, 17 April 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/cnxNS>> or <<https://news.usni.org/2023/04/17/feds-investigating-former-sailor-behind-pro-russian-donbas-devushka-accounts>>.

¹¹⁴ Burns, 6 May 2023. See note 99 above. Commencing at 2m 25s.

even though Lira had never described himself as anything but a blogger. Lira had been explicitly referred to as a journalist by RT (*Russia Today*), in the headline to an opinion piece published shortly after Lira's first disappearance in April 2022.¹¹⁵ The author of that opinion piece was Scott Ritter, who would later incur Lira's displeasure for his statements (see page 38 above). In a story published just 9 hours previously, RT had used the word 'blogger' in a news headline about Lira's disappearance, and described him as a 'film-maker and author'.¹¹⁶ So judging by this same-day change of description, it seems that Scott Ritter was the first prominent voice to assert that Lira was a journalist, and that his exaggeration was in turn amplified by RT.

It is not difficult to imagine why RT would have picked up on Ritter's erroneous description. Press freedom is an American shibboleth, identified in the First Amendment to the US Constitution as a vital defence against potential encroachments by government power. Identifying Lira as a journalist was therefore certain to make American audiences angry with the Ukrainian government, and to cast President Zelensky in a far less favourable light. Obviously, people living in foreign countries are not directly protected by the USA's First Amendment, but the issue would naturally be polarising and inflammatory. And the consequent uproar about Gonzalo Lira's constitutional right to journalistic freedom proves that this strategy was ultimately successful.

On the other hand, the anti-Lira propagandists Sarah Ashton-Cirillo and Dylan Burns weren't journalists either. In Ashton-Cirillo's case, the journalistic facade was a conscious act of deception. It is not so clear whether Dylan Burns is pretending or whether he is simply immersed in his own situation. One supposedly disparaging comment broadcast by Burns, as he sat in a darkened room reading excerpts from the *Daily Beast* to his audience, is particularly painful for its lack of self-awareness:

[A]ll the people who are trying to . . . jump to Gonzalo Lira's defence [. . .] they're calling him a journalist. He's not a journalist [. . .] He didn't go out and report, he didn't go out and interview people, he didn't go out and do any journalism [. . .] If you just sit in your apartment and talk about the journalism that other people do and the pictures that other people take and videos that other people take . . . you're, at best, a commentator, or possibly just a streamer. Or both. Usually both.

¹¹⁵ Russia Today, 21 April 2022 at 7:06pm. See <<https://www.rt.com/russia/554289-gonzalo-lira-disappearance-ukraine/>>.

¹¹⁶ Russia Today, 21 April 2022 at 09:56am. See <<https://www.rt.com/russia/554256-lira-blogger-ukraine-missing/>>.

Blogger is a good way to put it though. He's not a journalist.¹¹⁷

Dylan Burns was approached in July 2024 and asked to explain his apparent involvement with UPI, and whether that relationship was still ongoing. He was also asked for his perspective on the ethical conflict between the duties of journalists and propagandists, and to which category he felt his work belonged. Finally, Burns was asked about professional relationships with LazerPig and Destiny, and asked whether he was concerned that he might have become entangled in covert intelligence activity. Dylan Burns declined to comment on each issue.

Having sabotaged Lira's Roundtable broadcast and mounted a sustained smear campaign against both the show and Lira himself, LazerPig had used this piggy-back publicity to siphon viewers away from Lira's subversive videos. On 22 February 2023, a month after sabotaging Lira's Roundtable, LazerPig had launched a rival video podcast mockingly called 'The NAFO Even Rounder Table'. On this show, which has been watched by 479,000 people, LazerPig was joined by guests who focussed on pro-NATO, pro-Ukrainian, and anti-Russian material. A good deal of each episode was naturally devoted to attacking Lira and undermining his output. In one exchange, LazerPig declared that Lira was 'insane. The guy is a mental nutcase. He doesn't have two braincells to rub together.' A few moments later, one of his guests gently pointed out that perhaps mental illness was no laughing matter, and LazerPig immediately contradicted himself by claiming instead that:

What [Lira] has, is an IQ below 90. *You are confusing mental illness with stupidity.* You need to understand this man is now, you know he's very old, he's in his late fifties now,¹¹⁸ and he has lived a life of drugs and alcohol ¹¹⁹ where he has jumped from one cause to the next cause to the next cause, always arguing on, like, the worst side possible to argue with, because it brings him fame and notoriety, And he's just got to the point where he just argues for the sake of arguing. I don't fully believe he has any idea what he's actually saying, he's just coming up with more talking points just to scream at people (Emphasis added.)¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Burns, 6 May 2023. See note 99 above. Commencing at 23m 33s.

¹¹⁸ The podcast's target audience were mainly in their teens and twenties, so this fatuous remark was clearly tailored to suit the average listener's prejudices.

¹¹⁹ LazerPig had no evidence to support this particular smear, because there was none.

¹²⁰ LazerPig, 'NAFO "Even Rounder" Podcast Ep:1 The Animarchy Show', YouTube.com, 21 April 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/oj3WWIVCFeY>> commencing at 59m 04s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/nafo-even-rounder-podcast-ep-1-the-animarchy-show>>.

The 'Even Rounder Table' was picking up steam. The third show in the series¹²¹ carried a prefatory announcement by LazerPig, stating that the show was now officially Ukrainian propaganda, having obtained affiliation with United24 Media. The static backdrop to the podcast included a figure representing Gonzalo Lira, peering angrily through the barred window of a cell door with the legend 'NAFO prison' above it.

United24 Media is a propaganda arm of the Ukrainian government, created by President Zelensky himself. A team of 40 skilled editorial production staff creates an unceasing flow of digital pro-Ukraine content, in the form of videos, photographs, and text, which is poured into social media and from there cascades across the wider internet. One staff member is former journalist Gleb Gusev who, before the Russian invasion, had edited *Babel.ua*, a broadsheet-market news site mostly funded by USAID money. Gusev has spoken candidly about his decision to transfer to United24: 'Putting it mildly, it's advertising. Our job is to illustrate whatever message the government wants to convey [. . .] *My journalistic instincts rebel*. But then I think: "This work can make a difference.'" (Emphasis added.)¹²²

With LazerPig's YouTube channel formally affiliated with United24, he and his associates believed they had become journalists, despite openly revelling in their own status as amateur propagandists. Rather than think about a public responsibility to provide accurate news of any kind, they discussed the alluring prospect of acquiring Ukrainian press credentials.

One of LazerPig's guests on this third podcast referred to 'Jake, the main man', and said that this Jake probably had Ukrainian press accreditation. Jake was not described further, but it may be a reference to Jake Broe, a prominent pro-Ukrainian YouTuber with a US military background, whose channel has 445,000 subscribers. Like LazerPig and his coterie, Broe has denounced Gonzalo Lira multiple times, and has repeated the unsubstantiated claim that Lira was sending photographs to Russian intelligence. Broe has been challenged on this point, but refused to retract it. If Broe is affiliated with the Ukrainian government's propaganda effort, he has never admitted it.



Jake Broe
(Credit: Airman Vision)

Strikingly, Jake Broe published an anti-Lira video immediately after Lira's

¹²¹ Billed as Episode 2, since the numbering had started at zero.

¹²² *The New Yorker*, 29 January 2024. See <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/02/05/ukraines-democracy-in-darkness>>.

death, which then became the top result when searching YouTube for Gonzalo Lira's name. The video remained the top result for four consecutive months. This was despite the fact that Broe's video (entitled 'Gonzalo Lira was not a journalist') had been watched by far fewer people than other videos in the same search results. It would seem that YouTube rigged the search results to ensure that Broe's video was on semi-permanent display. The inferred purpose of such rigging would be to counter Lira's dissenting material. YouTube has done this with contentious issues in the past, most notably skewing search results during the Coronavirus pandemic so that videos containing official medical advice would always be ranked above amateur speculation.¹²³ Since Jake Broe also seems to think that Gonzalo Lira was an agent of the Soviet Union, YouTube's wisdom on this particular point is questionable.

Jake Broe was approached in July 2024, and asked about his apparent involvement with the Ukrainian war effort, and specifically whether he had received press accreditation from the Ukrainian ministry of defence. He was also asked if he knew anything about why YouTube seemed to be boosting his videos. Finally, Broe was asked whether his repeated condemnations of Gonzalo Lira were underpinned by any substantive but undeclared Ukrainian affiliations. Jake Broe declined to comment on each issue.

Another of LazerPig's guests on the third 'Ever Rounder Table' podcast said: 'I've been meaning to get Ukrainian press accreditation, because we could all apply for it, I believe. Do you have yours, Dylan?' to which Burns replied: 'Yep. I'm accredited [sic] with the Ministry of Defence. Yep. Got a press card and everything.' Burns, then, had taken (or had been led on) the same administrative route as Sarah Ashton-Cirillo. LazerPig then showed his own understanding of the purpose of a free press by inquiring:

[I]n terms of the [press] pass, er, Dylan, have you noticed that it, kind of, it's kind of opened doors for you? *Or are you still feeling that, er, you're kind of left on the, you're kind of left on the side burner or something, you need to try and find the stories yourself?* Because I did, I did notice that, um, that not that long ago, you were following around teams of, er, people who were doing de-mining operations.¹²⁴ (Emphasis added.)

Not that Burns needed to worrying about 'finding the stories himself'. He was being driven from place to place, sometimes by a Ukrainian territorial defence

¹²³ *Fast Company*, 16 March 2020. See <<https://shorturl.at/biG57>> or <<https://www.fastcompany.com/90477483/google-and-youtube-arent-entrusting-covid-19-to-an-algorithm>>.

¹²⁴ LazerPig 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 1h 01m 33s.

force team,¹²⁵ recording whatever human interest material suited his masters. He was appearing on a podcast that was officially Ukrainian propaganda, and discussing how he became a propagandist. No-one in the discussion seemed to realise or care that producing government propaganda and passing it off as independent journalism is grossly unethical and potentially downright fraudulent.

On one such fact-finding mission, Burns had set out to augment an alarmist story repeatedly propagated by the Ukrainian government, about the possibility of Russian bombardment causing a Chernobyl-type meltdown at the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia. Burns could have served the public's best interests by investigating the likelihood of such an accident, or inquiring about the technological improvements in reactor design since (and arising from) the 1986 radiation leak. Instead, Burns 'wanted to talk to locals about the possibility of a disaster and how it would affect them'. This vox pop exercise had supposedly exposed him to grave peril yet again, with Burns claiming that: '*I counted fifty explosions in thirty seconds [. . .] because the shelling was so unbelievably heavy.*' (Emphasis added.) It is not clear how Burns was able to make such a seemingly-superhuman observation.¹²⁶

The nuclear sabotage scare-story had been created by the SBU in August 2015, perhaps with CIA connivance, via documents leaked simultaneously to friendly media outlets in the US and the UK – respectively, *Newsweek*¹²⁷ and *The Times*.¹²⁸ These forged documents implicated the secessionist 'People's Republics' of the Donbas¹²⁹ in attempts to procure radiological materials and construct a 'dirty bomb'. This alleged terrorist plot was supposedly being carried out with the assistance of Russian intelligence, using material salvaged from a local nuclear waste disposal site. The waste in question had arrived in the Donbas from the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the Ukrainian midlands, until the usual waste transit route was severed by the attempted Donbas secessions. Two days later, Ukrainian news outlet *Hvylya* had published a hair-

¹²⁵ LazerPig 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 1h 03m 21s.

¹²⁶ LazerPig 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 1h 10m 16 seconds.

¹²⁷ *Newsweek*, 31 July 2015. See <<https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-says-rebels-are-building-dirty-bomb-358885>>.

¹²⁸ *The Times*, 1 August 2015. See <<https://shorturl.at/nwLT1>> or <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ukraine-rebels-building-dirty-bomb-with-russian-scientists-lgbbhlmhn8r>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/ubAbi>>.

NB that the same reporter wrote the *Times* and *Newsweek* versions of this story, and was therefore the SBU's – presumably trusting – intermediary.

¹²⁹ I.e. the Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk.

raising op-ed insisting that Russia was planning to stage a nuclear incident in the Donbas. Naturally, this alarming tale cited the bogus story that Ukraine's own SBU had fed to *The Times* and *Newsweek*.¹³⁰ *Hvylya* also cited NATO commander USAF General Philip M. Breedlove, who had supposedly confirmed the presence of Russian nuclear weapons in the Donbas, during a press briefing in May that year. In reality, General Breedlove had done precisely the opposite, stating that: 'We have not seen direct evidence of any deployment of [Russian] nuclear weapons [in Ukraine].'¹³¹

This SBU psyop had fizzled out a few days later, with the SBU's irrelevant announcement that it had intercepted a 5 kg ingot of Uranium ore, concealed in a tube of Pringles by smugglers, *en route* to Romania.¹³² Quite what use Uranium ore in Romania would be to terrorists 1,000 miles away on the other side of Ukraine was left to the imagination, and maybe that was the point. Much like radioactive waste itself, Ukraine's 'nuclear terrorism' psy-op is garbage that refuses to fade away peacefully. Dylan Burns was no different to all the other propagandists who had attempted to smuggle it into the news media over the course of a decade.

During the same livestream in which Burns related his non-event at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, LazerPig got so carried away with his own propaganda that he achieved the feat of minimising Nazism and the Holocaust at the same time. He even explained how and why he did it.

It's the same answer that I give over time, every time I meet one of these vatniks in the wild. But any time they start their spiel about what Ukraine did, about the Azov legion, [sic] and about the, the Nazis, and the whatever And how evil NATO is, and NATO expansion, whatever. I just repeat the same line. Russia's actively committing genocide.

LazerPig consistently refuses to refer to the Azov Battalion as a battalion, a company, or any other kind of formal military unit. This has the effect of incorrectly dissociating it from the formal armed forces of the Ukrainian state. Having artificially distanced Ukraine from its own neo-Nazis, LazerPig then

¹³⁰ *Hvylya*, 3 August 2015. See <<https://shorturl.at/luKPX>> or <<https://hvylya.net/analytics/geopolitics/pochemu-ugrozu-yadernogo-udara-so-storonyi-rossii-po-ukraine-nuzhno-rassmatrivat-serezno.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹³¹ NATO Chiefs of Defense meeting, press conference, 21 May 2015 at <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_119868.htm>.

¹³² SBU news release, 5 August 2015. See <http://www.sbu.gov.ua/sbu/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=153794&cat_id=39574> (source in Ukrainian).

dismissed their significance altogether by ranting that the Third Reich's extermination programme was unimportant in comparison to the genocide he said was happening in Ukraine:

[I]t doesn't matter if Britain has a fucking monarchy, it doesn't matter if, er, America did the Trail of Tears and slavery and . . . and . . . it doesn't matter if [. . .] the Dutch East India Company committed absolute mass genocide, it doesn't matter if Britain slaughtered millions, potentially absolute millions of Indians. It doesn't matter if NATO has gradually expanded and threatened Russia. Russia is actively committing genocide. That is the one line, that is what we are trying to prevent. [. . . W]e're not trying to roll up fucking Russia because we're racist. We're not trying to . . . increase the power of fucking NATO over yet another small eastern European country. No. We're trying to prevent a genocide. Russia is actively committing genocide. Children have gone missing. There are about something ridiculous like thirty thousand people are still missing. I've seen the bodies. I've seen the pictures. I er, I ah, I've seen the . . . *we have more evidence of this genocide than we do about the fucking Holocaust.*¹³³ (Emphasis added.)

Obviously recognising the unpleasant looming implications of LazerPig's argument, one of his guests – a historian – gently cut him off with: 'We've still got the camps for those.' Fortunately, LazerPig took the hint and immediately calmed down, agreeing: 'We still have the camps.' The pair then immediately changed the subject. It had been an extremely delicate moment for the two propagandists, in a podcast watched by 300,000 people.

Given his academic discipline, LazerPig's guest must have known (but chose not to say) that the Holocaust is one of the most extensively and minutely documented events in recorded history. The overabundance of evidence is mainly due to the meticulous record-keeping of the totalitarian regime that inspired the creation of the Azov Battalion in modern Ukraine – or, as LazerPig preferred to call them, the 'Azov legion'. LazerPig was downplaying the significance of the Third Reich's crimes in order to foment public disgust and repulsion toward Russia. All this would have been music to the ears of Azov's founder, Andriy Biletsky, whose program for the revived Patriot of Ukraine movement had stated unequivocally that:

[T]he healing of our National Body should begin with the Racial Purifying of the Nation. And then, with a healed racial body will, a healthy National Spirit will be revived, and with it culture, language and everything else.

¹³³ LazerPig 18 June 2023. See note 49 above. Commencing at 2h 59m 08s.

[. . .] Ukrainians are part of (and one of the largest and highest quality) of the European White Race. The race that created the greatest of civilizations, and the highest human achievements. The historical mission of our Nation in this pivotal century is to lead the White Peoples of the whole world on the last crusade for their existence. A campaign against the Semite-led *untermensch*.¹³⁴

LazerPig was approached in July 2024, and asked whether his activities concerning the Lira case had been spontaneous and autonomous. He was also asked to explain why he had made numerous false statements that tended to incriminate Gonzalo Lira. Finally, LazerPig was also asked to set out the extent to which he had collaborated and coordinated with Steven Borrell (AKA Destiny). LazerPig declined to comment on each issue

VI: Ley de Fugas en Ucrania

You see, if I go and do a channel that's dedicated to the Flat Earth . . . and 'I'm telling you, the Earth is flat! I've seen it!' You know, 'I was flying on an airplane, I looked to either side, it was flat as a pancake! The Earth is flat, I tell you!' . . . if I do a channel with that kind of content, they're not going to bother me [. . .] Because of course the government doesn't care if somebody is spouting nonsense or something obviously ridiculous [. . .] It's when you start saying the truth that you get censored, see. Because nobody cares about a lie, or something fantastical and silly and foolish. They care about the truth, especially those truths that they're most desperate to hide.¹³⁵

On the evening of 31 July 2023, Gonzalo Lira attempted to flee Ukraine. Before he went, he scheduled a sequence of social media posts on YouTube and Twitter.com, all of which were automatically published (i.e. without his intervention) in the early hours of 1 August, Eastern European Standard Time (Ukraine's local time). Lira had composed the Twitter posts on the evening of 30 July. The three YouTube videos were recorded on 31 July at an undisclosed location, which Lira said was approximately five km from the Hungarian border.¹³⁶ In these videos Lira is heard stating that his attempt to cross into

¹³⁴ *Patriot of Ukraine*, 17 September 2006. See <https://rid.org.ua/ukrayins-kij-sotsial-natsionalizm/> (page deleted, archive only, source in Ukrainian).

¹³⁵ Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1 of part 1. Commencing at 10m 25s.

¹³⁶ From background clues, it can be determined that Lira was outside an OKKO service station, probably the branch at the westernmost end of the Uzhhorodska highway.

Hungary would take place 'in a couple of hours'. Once he had arrived in Hungary, he intended to apply for political asylum. The pre-escape YouTube videos depict outdoor scenery in full daylight, meaning they were recorded well before sunset, which on 31 July 2023 occurred at 8.33 pm local time.

Lira explained that he had been released on bail in early July, having spent nine and a half weeks in a SIZO pre-trial detention centre in the Kharkiv oblast since his arrest in May.¹³⁷

To be precise, Lira had been released on 6 July after posting bail of 402,600 Ukrainian hryvnia.¹³⁸

Following his release from SIZO, Lira had wisely refrained from his usual online activities. He had obviously

been monitoring the internet to see what people were saying about his case, because in the three videos published on 1 August he referred to himself as a journalist, for the first and last time. He had also been in contact with the US Embassy in Kyiv, but said he had only been offered 'empty bromides'. This lack of diplomatic intervention means that the US Department of State had refused to step in to assist him.

Lira said that for some reason he had not been fitted with an electronic ankle tag to monitor his whereabouts after release. Ukrainian authorities had also handed back his US and Chilean passports and his driving licence. Lira explained that he had been told, by other SIZO inmates, that the authorities were leaving the door open for him to escape the country because it would mean 'less hassle for them'.¹³⁹ Lira claimed that since legal representatives had already told him that he would be found guilty at his forthcoming trial, his decision to escape from Ukraine was the only rational choice. Lira was facing between five and eight years in a correctional labour prison, which he felt would be fatal due to his known heart problem. And, Lira said, if the prison conditions



Kharkiv sizo

(Credit: Anton Samarsky)

¹³⁷ The SIZO acronym is derived from *Slidchyi Izoliator* (Ukrainian: слідчий ізолятор), literally 'Investigative Isolator'.

¹³⁸ The sum in question was equivalent to 10,500 USD, and represented approximately twice the average Ukrainian's yearly income.

¹³⁹ Gonzalo Lira, 'I'm About To Cross the Border', 1 of 3, YouTube.com, 01 August 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/AW274f8s-ws>> commencing at 14m 10s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-31-july-2023-part-1-of-3>>.

didn't kill him then 'I will be killed on the inside'.¹⁴⁰

At some point after his arrival in SIZO in May, Lira had been moved to a cell that already contained seven prisoners, and the purpose of the move soon became clear: '[W]hat happened was that as I soon as I arrived, they [i.e. the other prisoners] beat the shit out of me.' Lira said that the attacks commenced at 1pm on 21 June 2023 and continued unceasingly for 30 hours, throughout which Lira was kept fully conscious. The purpose was to extract from Lira the passwords to his online banking accounts. The prisoners themselves had no internet access, and SIZO inmates are not allowed to hold money anyway. Therefore, Lira concluded that the SBU had discovered his online banking accounts during their examination of his confiscated computer, and were using the prisoners as their proxy extortionists. Afterward, when Lira's resistance had finally disintegrated and he had agreed to hand over his passwords, his worst assailant apologised to him and said he had been compelled to do it. Lira commented: 'I understood.'

What really unnerved me was that in the hour 25, maybe 26, two of these thugs held my head, and one of them used a toothpick to scratch the whites of my left eye. And the other guy, the guy who actually spoke a little bit of English, said 'You can read with just one eye, right . . .?' Not gonna lie, that really freaked me out.

Lira concluded that as he crossed the border into Hungary,

I'm going to be hoping that my name doesn't appear on any system, and that I'll be allowed through. That's my hope. If my name is on some system or some list they have at the border, then I'll be arrested and it will be effectively a death sentence. And so I'm posting this video so people know what happened to me if I really disappear.¹⁴¹

Lira then attempted to cross via the Chop-Tysa highway checkpoint¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Gonzalo Lira, 'I'm About To Cross The Border', 2 of 3, YouTube.com, 01 August 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/TuvY9l0ShhA>> commencing at 4m 25s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-31-july-2023-part-2-of-3>>.

¹⁴¹ Gonzalo Lira, 'I'm About To Cross The Border', 3 of 3, YouTube.com, 01 August 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/9jUa45UcOvE>> commencing at 5m 25s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-31-july-2023-part-3-of-3>>.

¹⁴² A customs and immigration installation, supported by the Ukrainian border control guard. For an outline of guard control at the Ukraine-Hungary border, see <<https://shorturl.at/knuV1>> or <<https://dpsu.gov.ua/en/structure/western-regional-directorate-of-the-state-border-service-of-ukraine/chop-border-guard-detachment//1000>>.

in Ukraine's western Zakarpattia Oblast.¹⁴³ He was challenged and stopped by the border checkpoint, but turned and fled back into Ukraine on his motorcycle. When Lira failed to show up at court the following day, Ukraine's SBU security service applied for a warrant for his arrest. The SBU's application to the court included the information that Lira had attempted to cross the border, and the make of motorcycle he was riding, along with its licence plate details.¹⁴⁴ At around two a.m. on 2 August, the day after the SBU's warrant application was granted, Lira was tracked down and re-arrested in Nelipyno, a small Ukrainian town 50 miles from the Chop-Tysa checkpoint.¹⁴⁵ The pre-scheduled social media posts that had appeared on 1 August 2023 were his last public statements.

Following Lira's re-arrest in Nelipyno, a court hearing on his case was held the same day, but the details of what transpired are officially secret. The information has been withheld 'in accordance with point four of part one of Article 7 of the Law of Ukraine "On Access to Court Decisions"'.¹⁴⁶

Soon after Lira's arrest, Eliot Higgins of the Bellingcat research group told his 300,000 Twitter followers that 'Gonzalo Lira made the genius decision to announce he was planning to flee Ukraine while on bail, and unsurprisingly, it appears he's been arrested. That's the sort of thing you should avoid posting for likes before you've actually done it.'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ If Lira had really been a Russian agent, as alleged by Sarah Ashton-Cirillo *et al*, then an escape to the Russian Federation would have made more sense. Not least because of the proximity of Lira's Kharkiv home to the Russo-Ukrainian border, 40 km away. The Chop-Tysa checkpoint is over 1,000 km from Kharkiv, and it took Lira several days to get there.

¹⁴⁴ SBU Kharkiv division, dated 1 August 2023 No. 70/1-7786, cited in Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 01.08.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/112573183-69afea3dc25a508403e28fadeb04e31d>> (source in Ukrainian). *Caveat lector*: The Ukrainian justice system's online portal is frankly disgraceful. Decisions that are published on one date can contain references to events that happened on dates that were still in the future at the time, and both can disagree with the stated date of the court's decision. Courtroom participants are anonymously referred to by numbers, (e.g. 'Person 1'), but elsewhere in the same document they might be referred to by another number. It is not clear what causes these disruptive errors, which are sometimes very difficult to detect.

¹⁴⁵ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 03.08.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/112640892-d715178a549d3a15635c6f1ec9d020f0>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹⁴⁶ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 02.08.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/112599724-e28c5430e4b959dab834e495d19d94cf>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹⁴⁷ Eliot Higgins, Twitter.com, 3 August 2023. See <<https://twitter.com/EliotHiggins/status/1686805015787171846>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/6MCIC>>

The most charitable explanation of this is that Higgins, an open-source intelligence researcher, did not understand the Twitter time-stamp system. The time-stamps seen on any given tweet are dictated by a user's own computer, and are meant to reflect the international time zones in which users are located. Thus, a tweet posted in the UK at midnight Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) will appear, to a user in Ukraine, to have been posted at 2 am Eastern European Standard Time (EEST). But if the UK user adjusts their own computer's time zone settings from GMT to EEST (i.e. GMT + 2 hours), they will see Ukrainian times on their own tweets. Adjusted to EEST, the timestamps on Gonzalo Lira's pre-scheduled tweets about his escape bid show that they were published on 1 August. There were 25 consecutive tweets in all, and they all appeared one after another, during the two minute interval from 1.23 am to 1.25 am, Ukraine local time.



Elliot Higgins
(Credit: Superbass)

As for Lira's three pre-escape videos, YouTube's displayed upload dates are somewhat erratic and unreliable. Objective inspection of the metadata of each video¹⁴⁸ proves that Lira's three pre-escape videos appeared in sequence, at 20-minute intervals, in the early hours of 1 August. Part one¹⁴⁹ was posted at 1:30 am, EEST. Part two¹⁵⁰ was posted at 1:50 am, EEST. Part three¹⁵¹ was posted at 2:10 am, EEST.

Self-evidently, then, Lira's automated social media posting in the early morning of 1 August was not what alerted border guards to his escape attempt in the early evening of 31 July.

Dylan Burns gleefully parroted Higgins's mistake:¹⁵² 'I believe Eliot Higgins summarised it very well. [. . . Lira] had to flee while, while pressing on a foghorn, an air-horn, garnering as much attention as physically possible. Very, very stupid.'¹⁵³ Reviewing Lira's pre-escape videos, Burns scoffed 'Everything [Lira] says here, about him being tortured, and beaten, and scratching his

¹⁴⁸ Performed with the YouTube Large analytics tool <<https://ytlarge.com/youtube/video-data-viewer/>>.

¹⁴⁹ See note 139 above.

¹⁵⁰ See note 140 above.

¹⁵¹ See note 141 above.

¹⁵² Dylan Burns, 'Gonzalo Lira Arrested in Ukraine AGAIN?!', YouTube.com, 3 August 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/9VztkhT2tn4>> commencing at 1m 31s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-arrested-in-ukraine-again-1080p>>.

¹⁵³ Burns, 3 August 2023. See note 152 above. Commencing at 04m 00s.

eyeballs with toothpicks All of this is just off what Gonzalo Lira himself has said. That's the only evidence we have.'¹⁵⁴

Not only was Burns arbitrarily rejecting first-hand allegations of torture, but he was refusing to consider the allegations by passively demanding third-party verification of an inherently secret crime. Even given the essential privacy of torture, Lira's allegations objectively reflect – both in their substance and sometimes in specific details – multiple proven instances of abuse and torture committed by Ukrainian authorities, up to and including murder by neglect and murder by design.

Ukraine became a member state of the Council of Europe in 1995, and committed in 1997 to adhere to the European Convention on Human Rights (hereinafter: 'The Convention'). Consequently, Ukrainian citizens have recourse to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) when they are abused by their own government and fail to get redress through the Ukrainian court system. Due to the deeply-entrenched corruption of Ukrainian power structures, such recourse happens a lot. In 2022 alone, the ECtHR received 2,075 applications from Ukrainian citizens, an average of 40 every week. In the same period, the court delivered 144 judgments on 372 applications. In 141 of those judgments, the ECtHR found that Ukraine had violated the Convention. In the years since Ukraine first became bound by the Convention, the commonest violations committed by Ukrainian state involve Article 2 (the right to life, and freedom from state killing) and Article 3 (the absolute prohibition of torture).

Perhaps the most serious ECtHR judgment ever passed upon the Ukrainian state concerns an internationally notorious murder committed in 2000. Its relevance to the Gonzalo Lira case will become clear. In the ECtHR case in question,¹⁵⁵ the Ukrainian president,¹⁵⁶ his Minister of Internal Affairs, and officers of the country's police and intelligence forces were found to have conspired to abduct and murder a troublesome journalist. After the murder, the Ukrainian government had mounted an elaborate cover-up, and – when the victim's family refused to be cowed – embarked on a years-long campaign of obstruction of justice.

Gongadze

Georgiy Gongadze (b. 1969; d. 2000) was the founder and editor of the online newspaper *Ukrainian Pravda*. He specialised in crusading journalism that drew

¹⁵⁴ Burns, 3 August 2023. See note 152 above. Commencing at 10m 23s.

¹⁵⁵ ECtHR: *Gongadze v. Ukraine*, no. 34056/02, judgment of 8 February 2006. See <<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-70853>>.

¹⁵⁶ Leonid Kuchma, in office from 1994 to 2005.



Georgiy Gongadze

attention to the governmental corruption and lack of free speech in Ukraine. As a result of this, Mr Gongadze had been stalked and harassed, which included being followed by an unfamiliar car on his daily journeys between his home and his office. When Gongadze noted the car's licence plate and made inquiries, he found it was registered to the police. Two months after publishing an open letter to the Ukrainian authorities decrying this persecution, Mr Gongadze disappeared. After a further two months, his decapitated body was discovered in woodland over 100 km from his home. His missing head was never found.

The Ukrainian government at first refused to confirm the headless corpse was Gongadze's and deliberately hampered attempts to identify it. The state used this uncertainty as an excuse not to release the corpse for burial, and later – when repeated independent forensic examinations had proved the body was indeed Gongadze's – refused to issue a death certificate. One of the independent forensic experts consulted by Gongadze's family lived outside Ukraine, but reported being harassed by the Ukrainian SBU while he was conducting his investigation.¹⁵⁷

While the authorities were still obstructing the examination and release of Gongadze's corpse, a series of audio recordings was leaked to the media. These recordings revealed discussions between the Ukrainian president and his Minister of the Interior, which had taken place before the Gongadze murder. The president wanted Gongadze silenced, and the minister informed the president that he could instruct men who were 'capable of anything',¹⁵⁸ these apparently being an illegal 'private army' of former members of Ukraine's own security forces.

The Ukrainian state prosecutor was later handed a video tape, in which a man was seen explaining to Ukrainian MPs that he had a collection of similar illicit audio recordings of the president and his inner circle conspiring to commit various crimes.¹⁵⁹ The man seen in the videotape was an SBU officer and had been personally responsible for guarding the president's office suite. While performing his duties, he had become aware of the president's criminal activities. These offended the SBU officer's patriotic sensibilities, and so he had

¹⁵⁷ Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 8 February 2001. See <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/a/42040.pdf>>.

¹⁵⁸ Gongadze v. Ukraine. See note 155 above, paragraph 88.

¹⁵⁹ Gongadze v. Ukraine. See note 155 above, paragraphs 138 and 139.

surreptitiously recorded numerous presidential conversations which, *inter alia*, indicated the president's involvement in the Gongadze murder.¹⁶⁰

The government's Minister of the Interior announced that the murder was a non-political crime committed by two drug addicts, both of whom had since died, and the case was therefore closed. This was then contradicted by the chief state prosecutor.¹⁶¹ A police officer was arrested in connection with Gongadze's murder, and subsequently died 'in unclear circumstances', having been beaten and tortured while in SIZO pre-trial detention. The officer's corpse was cremated in secret, without an autopsy.¹⁶² A number of statements written by the dead officer were then leaked to the media. These statements accused police officers and government figures of having conspired to murder Gongadze.

As a result, three other police officers were eventually convicted of abducting Gongadze. These officers were 'Werewolves', this being an informal and secret police gang within the Ministry of the Interior, that specialised in committing untraceable crimes on behalf of other officers and officials. The three convicted officers implicated their commander as the person who actually committed the murder. The commander was an intimate associate of the minister heard discussing Gongadze on the illicit audio recordings of presidential conversations. The minister had apparently rewarded the police commander for the murder, by gifting him a luxury apartment in an exclusive Kyiv development. Shortly before the minister himself was due to be questioned in connection with the Gongadze case, he was found dead in his country villa, shot twice in the head. The minister left a suicide note, but the media noted that he had complained of being followed in the days before his death, and had unexplained broken fingers when he died.

The ECtHR's judgment in the case brought against Ukraine by Gongadze's widow delivered unanimous verdicts that the Ukrainian state committed two violations of Article 2 of the Convention (substantive and procedural), by depriving Gongadze of his life and then failing to investigate its own culpability. Ukraine had also violated Article 3 when it subjected his widow to inhumane and degrading treatment by refusing to release her husband's body. Ukraine

¹⁶⁰ A transcript of the videotape was published in several outlets, including the *Kyiv Post* on 12 December 2000, See <<https://shorturl.at/FRT15>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/complete-english-language-translation-of-sbu-offic-6502.html>>. When the videotape of his discussions with MPs came to light, the SBU officer, Mykola Ivanovych Melnychenko, successfully applied for political asylum in the United States. A striking aspect of his disclosures is that Melnychenko was the only SBU officer whose principles compelled him to reveal what was going on.

¹⁶¹ Gongadze v. Ukraine. See note 155 above, paragraph 50.

¹⁶² Gongadze v. Ukraine. See note 155 above, paragraphs 76 and 77.

was also found guilty of violating Article 13 of the Convention (the right to an effective remedy for legal complaints) by consistently obstructing her attempts to seek justice. In a final affront to common decency, the police commander who actually murdered Gongadze was not convicted until 2013, more than a decade since he was identified, and seven years after the ECtHR had delivered its damning judgment against the Ukrainian state.¹⁶³



European Court of Human Rights
(Credit: Sfisek)

Gonzalo Lira's contention in July 2023 that the SBU and prison authorities were complicit in his torture is reflected in another ECtHR ruling,¹⁶⁴ which found that Ukraine was directly and indirectly responsible for the death of a prisoner who had been beaten and raped by other inmates in a sustained attack lasting several hours. Oleg Shchokin died of his injuries while the attack was still in progress. The Ukrainian authorities identified and prosecuted the prisoners who had actively committed the crimes, but refused to investigate the role of the prison staff. Officers had left Shchokin in handcuffs while he was beaten in a guard room, and had then passed him – still handcuffed – over to the gang that ultimately killed him. The ECtHR ruled that the failure to protect Shchokin,¹⁶⁵ and the subsequent refusal to investigate the role of prison officers in his death,¹⁶⁶ constituted two separate violations of Article 2 of the Convention (respectively, substantive and procedural). The torture to which he had been subjected, and the state's refusal to investigate its own participation in that

¹⁶³ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 30 January 2013. See <<https://www.osce.org/fom/99000>>.

¹⁶⁴ ECtHR: *Yuriy Illarionovich Shchokin v. Ukraine*, no. 4299/03, Judgment of 3 October 2013. See <<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-126537>> (source in French).

¹⁶⁵ *Shchokin v. Ukraine*. See note 164 above, paragraph 38.

¹⁶⁶ *Shchokin v. Ukraine*. See note 164 above, paragraph 44.

torture,¹⁶⁷ constituted two separate violations of Article 3 (again, substantive and procedural).

The 2013 *Shchokin* verdict accords with Gonzalo Lira's post-prison recollection in July 2023 that '[T]he guards, they never beat any of the prisoners. No. It's the prisoners who beat the other prisoners.'¹⁶⁸

Lira's account is borne out by an independent 2021 report that consulted NGOs and other authorities about humanitarian conditions in Ukraine's prison system.¹⁶⁹ The report found that 'prison guards employ prisoners to exercise violence within the prisons'. This unofficial internal prison code means that 'so-called "duty prisoners" are unofficially but openly working for the prison administration'. It added that in cases of torture, 'these cases are closed again relatively fast often because of a lack of evidence. It happens that a prisoner is not brought to a doctor before two months after an incident when the clear signs are gone and/or hard to detect.'¹⁷⁰

The 'internal prison code' is one of the worst things about the prison system of Ukraine, as the violence within the prison can be completely covered up afterward. Furthermore, a prisoner cannot complain in such situation[s] because it will most likely result in the perpetrators killing him.¹⁷¹

Lira's claim that he was threatened with the loss of an eyeball while in SIZO is reflected in another important ECtHR case.¹⁷² The court established that a prisoner serving life in a Ukrainian prison had suffered eye injuries, and that the injuries were deliberately left untreated and eventually made him completely blind. The injuries were inflicted during a brutal interrogation by the police officers who had arrested him, and specifically included a puncture wound in his left eyeball. The ECtHR found that the original injuries and the subsequent failure to treat them in prison¹⁷³ constituted two separate violations of Article 3 of the Convention, which states categorically that: 'No one shall be subjected to

¹⁶⁷ *Shchokin v. Ukraine*. See note 164 above, paragraphs 53 and 54.

¹⁶⁸ Lira (3/3), 1 August 2023. See note 141 above, commencing at 22s.

¹⁶⁹ Danish Immigration Service, *Country of Origin Information report: Ukraine – Prison Conditions*, November 2021. See <<https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2064634/ukraine-prison-conditions-2021.pdf>>.

¹⁷⁰ Danish Immigration Service, 2021. See note 169 above, page 59.

¹⁷¹ Danish Immigration Service, 2021. See note 169 above, p. 47.

¹⁷² ECtHR: *Kaverzin v. Ukraine*, no. 23893/03, judgment of 15 August 2012. See <<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-110895>>.

¹⁷³ *Kaverzin v. Ukraine*. See note 172 above, paragraphs 125 and 144.

torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.’

For some reason, the gouging of eyeballs has a particular cultural significance in Ukraine. During the Second World War, the Banderite OUN inflicted this horrific injury on whole families of suspected Russian collaborators.¹⁷⁴

On 1 August 2023, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller was asked whether the US was investigating Gonzalo Lira’s allegations of torture.

Miller replied: ‘I just want to verify anything before I comment.’¹⁷⁵ At the press briefing the following week, Miller was asked whether he had looked into the torture allegations yet. Miller replied: ‘[B]ecause of privacy considerations, there’s nothing further I can say.’ If there had really been privacy



Matthew Miller

considerations, then the State Department could have contacted Lira in Ukraine and asked for permission to speak publicly about his case. Evidently, the State Department had decided not to take this very straightforward step, which raises the question of whether they had contacted Lira at all.¹⁷⁶

When he was brought before a Ukrainian court on 3 August 2023 (his first known court appearance since being stopped at the Hungarian border and later apprehended by the SBU) Lira raised the attacks and extortion he had suffered in SIZO. He stated that he had not reported the abuse to SIZO authorities for fear of reprisals, and specifically put forward his belief that the SBU had instigated the attacks to obtain money from his online banking accounts. Lira told the court that the attempted extortion had failed because his bank had flagged the transaction as suspicious, and declined to transfer funds out of his account. Lira did not learn of this until he was granted bail, and consequently, he averred, one of his reasons for absconding was that he feared for his life because of potential reprisals. The court dismissed this, insisting that Lira had the procedural right to report violence against him to the prison staff, or to any other law enforcement officers, and had only raised them in court. Therefore, the court ruled Lira’s claims were not a valid excuse for absconding to Hungary.

¹⁷⁴ Per Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), as cited in Scott Newton’s ‘Historical notes on the war in Ukraine’, in *Lobster* 83.

¹⁷⁵ US Department of State, press briefing, 1 August 2023. See <<https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-1-2023/>>.

¹⁷⁶ US Department of State, press briefing, 9 August 2023. See <<https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-9-2023/>>.

Lira's application for bail was rejected, and he was sent back to the same SIZO prison that he had just told the court posed a threat to his life.¹⁷⁷

After Gonzalo Lira had fled the checkpoint on 31 July, but before he was re-arrested on 2 August, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo started denouncing him yet again, and in stronger terms than ever. Referring to the martial law in effect throughout Ukraine, she told her thousands of viewers that 'People need to understand that we're under a special law period. The laws are very clear [. . .] Free trials, free and fair trials, are still allowed for those who are accused.'¹⁷⁸ Having espoused such lofty principles, Ashton-Cirillo turned to Lira's attempt to seek asylum in Hungary and announced instead that:

An innocent man would stand and face trial. Gonzalo Lira is not an innocent man. Gonzalo Lira is a criminal propagandist.¹⁷⁹

Ashton-Cirillo was also very keen to defend the honour of the Ukrainian SBU, whom Lira had accused of being behind the violent extortion in SIZO. Ashton-Cirillo called those allegations 'figments of his imagination'. She proclaimed that 'The state security services, better known as the SBU, are some of the most talented and focussed law enforcement agents across the globe [. . .] they knew where Gonzalo Lira was, most certainly, every step of the way with his movements over the past 48 hours.' [Sic throughout.]¹⁸⁰ This new and inspiringly-pro-Ukrainian version of Lira's capture contradicted the demonstrably bogus tragicomic narrative promulgated by Eliot Higgins and regurgitated by Dylan Burns. (See page 74 above.) There is a far simpler explanation for Lira's apprehension at the border, which neither Ashton-Cirillo nor Higgins would have been keen to propose. Lira had been added to the Myrotvorets website's 'Purgatory' database soon after the Russian invasion began in early 2022 and his entry – complete with his full name, date of birth, and photograph – was online for anyone to view.¹⁸¹ This was the original cause of his concern about being 'unpersoned'. (See page 1 above.) Since the Myrotvorets website was ostensibly intended as a central reference source for Ukrainian authorities, it would be entirely natural if a customs official had

¹⁷⁷ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 03.08.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/112640892-d715178a549d3a15635c6f1ec9d020f0>>. (Source in Ukrainian)

¹⁷⁸ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, 'Ukraine in the Know', YouTube.com, 1 August 2023. This video has been deleted by its publishers, Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces Media. It is archived at <<https://archive.org/details/ukraine-in-the-know-01-august-2023>> commencing at 06m 10s.

¹⁷⁹ Ashton-Cirillo, 1 August 2023. See note 178 above, commencing at 08m 07s.

¹⁸⁰ Ashton-Cirillo, 1 August 2023. See note 178 above, commencing at 08m 40s.

¹⁸¹ <<https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/lira-gonsalo/>>

become curious after checking either of Lira's two foreign passports, and simply typed Lira's name into a search engine. Lira may have become aware, too late, of the inevitability of this outcome. Before setting off, he had mused 'I'm going to be hoping that my name doesn't appear on any system, and that I'll be allowed through'. (See page 72 above.) The Myrotvorets biography alone would have provided sufficient information about Lira for Ukrainian customs officers to challenge or detain him.

There is also a very real possibility that Lira had, unwittingly, been deliberately pressurised into absconding so that he could be permanently imprisoned as a 'flight risk'. What happened to Lira is reminiscent of the Spanish tradition of the *Ley de Fugas* (Law of Escapes), a form of extrajudicial murder once widespread in Latin American countries. A prisoner is taken into an open area, such as a forest or desert, and offered a choice. He can stay in captivity and suffer unspeakable consequences, or win his freedom by successfully escaping. Faced with no choice at all, the prisoner is allowed to run off, having been told he has been given a head start on his pursuers. The prisoner is then shot in the back from a distance, allowing the murder to be classified as a case of justified lethal force in pursuit of a suspect. This form of murder was not unknown in Chile during Lira's own early life there. In November 1971, a US foreign policy memorandum noted 40 apparent *Ley de Fugas* killings in the aftermath of the coup that had installed General Pinochet as dictator two months earlier.¹⁸²

The negative consequences of staying in Ukraine, weighed together with the encouragement of the SIZO inmates, had together forced Lira to make his decision. In his pre-escape videos, Lira had provided sound reasoning for his belief that the SBU was responsible for his torture at the hands of his fellow-prisoners. It would have been easy for the SBU to instruct their proxy torturers to encourage Lira to flee Ukraine. The fact that, per Lira, he had already been told that he would be found guilty if he stayed in Ukraine implies another, negative, form of inducement that precipitated his escape bid.

While the Ukrainian border guard is an armed force, there is no indication that anyone planned to kill Lira while he was attempting to cross into Hungary. Lira had been simultaneously pushed and pulled to run straight into a trap. If



Gonzalo Lira,
pre-escape video

¹⁸² US Department of State, 'Briefing Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Kubisch) to Secretary of State Kissinger', dated 16 November 1971. See <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve11p2/d153>>.

the object of the exercise was to silence him, then it succeeded.

Dylan Burns echoed the Ukrainian state's line in his own videos about Lira's rearrest. On 3 August 2023, he declared '[I]t's not pro-Russia sympathies, [Lira] is pro-Russia. He is pro-invasion, he is pro-war.' Responding to online claims that Lira would be subjected to a show trial, Burns laughed in mock disbelief:

'A show trial! "A *show trial*" assumes that he didn't commit the crime, but we've seen him publicly endorse the bombing of Ukraine enough to know that he did commit the crime. It's not a show trial if he did commit the crime.'¹⁸³

Burns was of course wrong on that point: a show trial is not necessarily a fake trial. Insofar as 'justice must be seen to be done', every trial is to some extent a show trial. Burns evidently didn't realise or care that a defendant has the right to be presumed innocent until proven otherwise, either.

Shortly before Lira's first arrest in May 2023, a new YouTube channel had joined the onslaught against him. 'Facts Hunter' described himself only as 'a facts hunter in a jungle of misinformation surviving in the information age'. It became clear with the passage of time that Facts Hunter' was only interested in Gonzalo Lira, and damaging Lira's credibility in the eyes of his audience.¹⁸⁴ The creator of the videos was, like Lira, a Hispanic-American. He disclosed that he was 'A proud Navy veteran who loves America', and stated:

The reason why I'm making videos about Gonzalo Lira is because that piece of shit hates the west and is actively rooting for the fall of the United States. Gonzalo Lira Lopez is, in my eyes, an enemy of the country I made a promise to protect.¹⁸⁵

Facts Hunter published lengthy montages of narrated material, some of which he augmented with translations of Spanish-language news coverage about Lira's pre-internet life, which Facts Hunter had obtained from Chilean newspaper archives.

This barrage of videos continued during Lira's imprisonment in May, his

¹⁸³ Burns, 03 August 2023. See note 152 above, commencing at 08m 28s.

¹⁸⁴ Facts Hunter published 21 videos between March and December 2023, and 20 of them were about Lira. The sole exception was on 6 June, when Facts Hunter republished an excerpt from a livestream debate hosted by Dylan Burns.

¹⁸⁵ Facts Hunter, 'Gonzalo Lira's Father's Rage: The Unexpected Reaction to My Video', YouTube.com, 5 November 2023 See <<https://youtu.be/F9Mp9m5Zg3c>>commencing at 4m 27s. Archived at <<https://shorturl.at/cs078>> or <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-liras-fathers-rage-the-unexpected-reaction-to-my-video-my-reply-to-gonza>>.

release on bail in July, and his return to prison in August. Facts Hunter stated that he hoped he would stop making videos about Lira 'before he dies while incarcerated. This is not entirely impossible, given that he claims to have a heart condition [. . .] It doesn't matter. Rot in jail, Gonzalo Lira.'¹⁸⁶ On 27 December 2023, with Lira having been in custody for five months, Facts Hunter concluded:

It sucks to be Gonzalo Lira. And all of his fans can forget the idea of ever watching another video from his idol [sic]. Not any time soon, baby! Bye bye, Gonzalo Lira. A minimum of 10 years in a labour camp.¹⁸⁷

In the background as Facts Hunter spoke, a video clip of Gonzalo Lira was overlaid with a cartoon gravestone engraved with the words 'The End'.

But Facts Hunter wasn't quite finished.

A new year is coming, and this channel is going to start focussing on making pro-Ukrainian videos in the new year of 2024. [. . .] I will probably lose some followers but I don't care. I am against Putin and I'm pro-west. [. . .] I'm a facts hunter and Russian propaganda is my enemy. *Slava Ukraini!*

VII: 'Make it go away'

Realistically, you know Me talking about this shit . . . is fucking dangerous as fuck [. . .] It's easier to keep quiet [. . .] And if everybody stays quiet the . . . you know, these kinds of abuses will continue. You have to make a stand and say 'No, enough.' You have to speak your mind [. . .] We're afraid to punch up. Because we think that it's going to hurt us. We think we're going to be the only one. And see, maybe we are the only one. And most definitely, if we punch up, those fuckers, they don't have any scruples about punching down at us [. . .] There are some things that are worth taking a risk, and there are some things that are worth taking the hit.¹⁸⁸

Having publicly declared Lira guilty before he was even arrested, Sarah Ashton-

¹⁸⁶ Facts Hunter, 5 November 2023. See footnote 185 above, commencing at 27m 37s.

¹⁸⁷ Facts Hunter, 'Gonzalo Lira's Latest Update: Coach Red Pill Behind Bars in Ukraine', YouTube.com 27 December 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/UGFfyq9ay9s>> commencing at 21m 59s. Archived at <<https://shorturl.at/dkoS4>> or <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-update-december-23-2023-crp-in-ukrainian-jail-facts-hunter-24-december-2023-720px>>.

¹⁸⁸ Gonzalo Lira, 'Who Is Zelensky? A Puppet—and Here's Why', YouTube.com, 05 March 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/j7NTLZDd4tc>> commencing at 2h 25m 10s.

Cirillo became a prosecution witness in the trial against him. There has never been any explanation for this. Ashton-Cirillo was just a spokesperson, the Ukrainian military's public relations 'face' for western media, and she had never met or even spoken to Lira before. Six weeks after Lira's capture at the Hungarian border, Ashton-Cirillo told her social media followers:

So this morning I testified in the case of Ukrainian authorities against Gonzalo Lira. I can't say anything else beyond that, based off of national security issues [. . .] And ultimately I have no doubt that the rule of law will be applied fairly, and the court system is definitely a strong point here in Ukrainian society.¹⁸⁹



*Sarah Ashton-Cirillo,
September 2023 video*

This last remark was false, and Ashton-Cirillo must have known it was false. Ukraine's court system is notoriously corrupt, even in peacetime, and the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian citizens have little or no faith in it.¹⁹⁰

It is not even clear what role Ashton-Cirillo played in the September court hearing. No remarks from any prosecution witnesses are recorded in the official summary. Nor, in the same summary, is there any indication that national security was mentioned, or invoked. The Ukrainian military was asked why Ashton-Cirillo was a witness in the prosecution case against Lira. A spokesman refused to comment.

Given Ashton-Cirillo's consistent bad-faith conduct toward Gonzalo Lira, the inference is that she was trying to make a routine hearing sound more incriminating and exciting. At the hearing in question, no new information was lodged. Lira's latest application for release on bail was denied, and his detention in Kharkiv SIZO was extended until 10 November.¹⁹¹

On 13 September, Ashton-Cirillo published an extraordinary video

¹⁸⁹ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 12 September 2023. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1701564358189277380>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/zZ3wQ>>. Video archived separately at <<https://archive.org/details/sarah-ashton-cirillo-twitter-12-september-2023>>.

¹⁹⁰ Discussed in 'Volodymyr Zelensky and the breadbasket-case of Europe', in *Lobster* 87.

¹⁹¹ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 11.09.2023, Case No. 638/5519/23. See <<https://shorturl.at/Qwo8N>> or <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/113391595-51062308e39fe572abad2e070e7d5488>> (source in Ukrainian). NB that this electronic document is dated 11 September, whereas the contents of that document repeatedly state that the hearing was held on 12 September. Consequently, it is impossible to determine which date is correct.

statement in her capacity as military spokesperson, in which she told viewers:

Next week, the teeth of the Russian devils will gnash ever harder, and their rabid mouths will foam an uncontrollable frenzy, as the world will see a favourite Kremlin propagandist pay for their crimes. And this puppet of Putin is only the first. Russia's criminal propagandists will all be hunted down and pay for their crimes [. . .]¹⁹²

Ashton-Cirillo's outburst corroborates somewhat Gonzalo Lira's claim that he had been told he would be found guilty. (See page 4 above.)

After this latest combination of corruption and threats, Ashton-Cirillo had originally been suspended from military duty on 19 September. This was not adequately explained to the public, and it appeared that Ashton-Cirillo had simply stopped posting on social media. After that, there were no further public announcements about Lira's trial. Contrary to Ashton-Cirillo's menacing prognostications, there was no court hearing the following week, or for the remainder of September 2023.

But later the same month, Ashton-Cirillo fell victim to a hoax video call masterminded by the notorious Russian comedians Vovan and Lexus.¹⁹³ Duped into believing she was speaking to former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, Ashton-Cirillo said that her suspension was 'political', and explained how she had been suspended on 19 September 2023. The Ukrainian state had initially mounted a cursory investigation that cleared and re-instated her within 24 hours of the suspension. Ashton-Cirillo admitted that this investigation was just a sham, and had been performed in order to sustain the prosecution case against Gonzalo Lira.

What's not being said is that I am an expert witness in the case against a Russian agent in Kharkiv. And so by knocking me out of this position, it made my testimony less effective. So, so you know the process.¹⁹⁴

But Ashton-Cirillo had had a surprise the next day (20 September 2023), when

¹⁹² Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Twitter.com, 13 September 2023. See <<https://twitter.com/SarahAshtonLV/status/1702013564465156204>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/uXiiR>>. Video archived separately at <<https://archive.org/details/sarah-ashton-cirillo-twitter-video-13-september-2023>>.

¹⁹³ Respectively, the pseudonyms of Vladimir Kuznetsov (born 1986) and Alexei Stolyarov (born 1987). The exact timing of the hoax call is unclear, but from its contents it took place after 21 September and before 28 September 2023 (the latter being the date it was re-uploaded to YouTube).

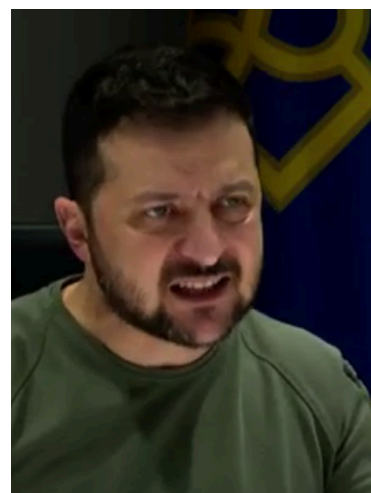
¹⁹⁴ Vovan and Lexus, 'Sarah Ashton-Cirillo', YouTube.com, 28 September 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/ISNU191AEDk>> commencing at 11m 31s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/vovan-and-lexus-yt-re-upload-28-september-2023>>.

the Territorial Defence Force formally announced she had been suspended, for what were referred to as her recent and unapproved statements. Ashton-Cirillo knew it was really a re-suspension, even though the announcement didn't say so. The Ukraine Territorial Defence Forces' official social media account reassured the public that, contrary to Ashton-Cirillo's terroristic threats,¹⁹⁵ 'When conducting military operations against the aggressor, the defense forces of Ukraine strictly observe the norms of international humanitarian law.'¹⁹⁶ Asked by 'Poroshenko' who had ordered her re-suspension, Ashton-Cirillo replied:

I was told sir, that it came from the highest levels, that's all I was told. And General Tantsyura¹⁹⁷ was the one who decided on the suspension and the language of the suspension [. . .] I was told that it came from New York, sir, from the trip that the government is on, currently [. . .] I think I was told that they had to make a big deal and to shut me up, in order to possibly get help.¹⁹⁸ (Emphases added.)

The 'New York trip that the Government is on' refers to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the headquarters of the United Nations. Zelensky had arrived in New York City on 18 September 2023. On 19 September, he addressed the UN General Assembly, with a 15-minute speech exhorting world leaders to take firmer action against what he called Russian terrorism.¹⁹⁹

While still in New York, Zelensky addressed the UN Security Council on 20 September, and sought unsuccessfully to persuade the council to remove



Zelensky at the UN

¹⁹⁵ Her remarks about how Russian propagandists 'will all be hunted down' (see p. 86 above) and how 'justice is going to catch up to every Russian agent, terrorist, war criminal, and propagandist, across the world'. (See page 61 above.)

¹⁹⁶ Ukrainian Territorial Defence Force, Twitter.com, 20 September 2023. See <https://twitter.com/TDF_UA/status/1704513697157120271>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/ohBqC>>.

¹⁹⁷ General Ihor Ivanovych Tantsyura (born 1967), commander of Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces at the time. About 12 days after the recording of Ashton-Cirillo's unguarded remarks was published, Tantsyura was dismissed by Zelensky. No reason was given. Presidential Decree Number 678/2023, dated 9 October. See <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/6782023-48573>> (source in Ukrainian).

¹⁹⁸ Vovan and Lexus, 28 September 2023. See note 194 above, commencing at 12m 36s.

¹⁹⁹ UN News, 19 September 2023. See <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141002>>.

Russia's power to veto resolutions.²⁰⁰ Ashton-Cirillo's re-suspension on 20 September 2023 had been ordered by Zelensky himself, in order to make things easier during his visit to the UN.²⁰¹

On 21 September, the last full day of his visit to the US, Zelensky met privately with President Joe Biden in Washington D.C., officially to discuss military aid to Ukraine and a pet subject of Biden's, Ukrainian anti-corruption measures.²⁰² Ashton-Cirillo continued:



Zelensky meeting Biden in May 2023.

'I believe that it [i.e. her suspension] was truly political, because the Republicans are trying to use the case of Gonzalo Lira to say that we're against free speech, the Russian agent I – or asset that I testified against as – to try to say we don't like free speech. I do believe that they were very angry in Washington that I was, I was being talked about with Gonzalo Lira, that the two Americans were being discussed, and they were told "Make it go away".'²⁰³

The Ukrainian military was asked to explain why Ashton-Cirillo was re-suspended. A spokesman refused to comment.

After the publication of the Vovan/Lexus hoax call, no more was heard of the Gonzalo Lira case throughout the month of October, despite Ashton-Cirillo's earlier promise that Lira would 'pay for his crimes' in September. In the first week of November, Lira's latest application for bail was heard by the Kharkiv court and, predictably, it was dismissed. Instead, his SIZO detention was extended until 6 January 2024.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ UN News, 20 September 2023. See <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141127>>.

²⁰¹ The re-suspension was announced in Ukraine in the late afternoon on 20 September. Given the seven-hour timezone difference, this indicates that the demand had been issued from New York in what was still the morning for the USA's eastern seaboard, and thus before Zelensky addressed the UN Security Council.

²⁰² White House readout, 21 September 2023. See <<https://shorturl.at/uJSY0>> or <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/21/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-president-zelenskyy-of-ukraine/>>.

²⁰³ Vovan and Lexus, 28 September 2023. See note 94 above, commencing at 15m 06s.

²⁰⁴ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 07.11.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/114755951-8c4f22ac4e4d51d9cfeee607a40abdcb>> (source in Ukrainian). NB that this document was purportedly created on 7 November but refers to events on 8 November.

Nothing is known about Lira's experiences in custody after his arrest in August 2023. However it is known that at some point in October 2023, Lira became seriously ill with pneumonia and was belatedly transferred to the prison's medical wing. In a handwritten note, addressed to his sister and somehow smuggled out of SIZO,²⁰⁵ Lira stated that his illness had been ignored by prison authorities, and that those authorities had repeatedly failed to inform the investigating judge²⁰⁶ about his health during court hearings. The prison authorities' conduct is suspicious, since they would have learned that Lira had a heart condition when he was admitted to the SIZO medical unit, at the absolute latest,²⁰⁷ and had a duty to keep the judge informed of the prisoner's wellbeing. Pneumonia can be deadly if left untreated, particularly for patients with heart conditions, but can be cured efficiently within a week or two by the timely administration of antibiotics. Conspicuously, the onset of Lira's pneumonia in October coincides with the lack of court hearings that month.

In his note, Lira stated that his untreated double pneumonia had caused a pneumothorax, and that he had developed an oedema that caused 'swelling of the body'. Pneumothorax is better known as a collapsed lung, and is caused when a ruptured lung loses its internal pressure, leaking air into the surrounding body cavities. Such a secondary spontaneous pneumothorax²⁰⁸ can occur when the build-up of fluid pressure creates a hole by bursting blood vessels in the outer lung. In necrotising pneumonia, the death and decay of the lung tissue creates the aperture. It is very unlikely, but not impossible, that Gonzalo Lira had developed necrotising pneumonia, a variety of pneumonia so uncommon that there is no reliable information on its prevalence. In any case, a secondary spontaneous pneumothorax is a rare complication.²⁰⁹ While the relationship between Lira's pneumonia, pneumothorax and his generalised oedema (anasarca) is not clear, anasarca is a serious symptom of advanced

²⁰⁵ Widely published on social media in January 2024. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/lira-hospital-note>>.

²⁰⁶ The Ukrainian justice system follows a quasi-Napoleonic code. Criminal cases are assigned to investigative judges, who pass their judgments without a jury.

²⁰⁷ There is obviously no way of knowing whether Lira disclosed his heart condition to SIZO staff beforehand. Remand prisoners are usually given a general medical screening on arrival at a SIZO facility, but this would not be comparable to full examination of a patient under hospital supervision, even in a prison hospital.

²⁰⁸ 'Secondary' meaning arising from an underlying primary condition.

²⁰⁹ In an estimate published by the *British Medical Journal*, pneumothorax afflicts 22.7 out of every 100,000 people, not accounting for any primary conditions. Another authoritative estimate suggests it afflicts between 7.4 and 18 males out of every 100,000, on the same non-segregated basis as the BMJ estimate. See *European Respiratory Review*, 31 August 2010 at <<https://err.ersjournals.com/content/19/117/217>>.

illness and is typically life-threatening.

On 11 December 2023, with Lira not having appeared in court for a month, something very unusual happened. The Kharkiv court heard and granted an application for a lawyer from outside Ukraine to become involved in the case. His name was Claude Nicati and he represented the Switzerland-based Union Internationale des Avocats (UIA), the International Union of Lawyers.²¹⁰ He was granted permission to communicate with Lira 'by means of correspondence, provision of services for access to the global Internet and telephone communication using IR-telephony'.²¹¹ During the same hearing, Nicati was also granted access to prosecution documents that were being withheld from Lira and the court ordered that these documents be translated into English for him.²¹² No explanation is provided in the court filing document for UIA's intervention in Lira's trial. According to the UIA's own mission statement:

The UIA is **committed** to defending the cause of lawyers who may be pressured or threatened anywhere in the world, through its lobbying and advocacy activities, and speaks out against **forces contrary to the proper functioning of the justice system.**²¹³ (Emphases in the original.)

The UIA was approached, and asked how and why it had become involved in the court proceedings against Lira, and at whose instigation. The UIA was also asked whether its representative, Claude Nicati, had played any part in getting the Kharkiv court to publicly acknowledge Lira's rapidly deteriorating health. Finally, the UIA was asked whether Mr Nicati had been the person who transported Lira's handwritten note out of prison. A UIA spokeswoman declined to comment on each issue.

At the very next court hearing, on 21 December, Lira's deteriorating health was mentioned in court for the first time. A doctor from the SIZO unit's medical ward told the court that Lira was suffering from 'pneumonia, bilateral pneumonia'. Lira was evidently in such bad health that he could not be transported to court, and attended the hearing via videolink. The court ruled that Lira was receiving satisfactory medical treatment and that there was

²¹⁰ UIA profile (undated). See <<https://www.uianet.org/en/directory/nicati-claude>>.

²¹¹ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 11.12.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/115567712-1bc77f26f92554ccaf3e7279007242e0>>. (source in Ukrainian).

²¹² Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 11.12.2023 in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/115866312-d9e2ba9a07e193084df3335ffc7f1ae1>> (source in Ukrainian).

²¹³ See <<https://www.uianet.org/en/about-us>>.

therefore no danger to his life. This is unlikely to have been the case. The Ukrainian prison system's healthcare facilities are 'poor and unhygienic', 'ineffective', and staffed by inadequately-trained medics.²¹⁴ Medicines are 'the worst area in the prison system in terms of supply and conditions', with cancer patients reporting their only treatment in captivity was aspirin.²¹⁵ Even the drinking water provided to prisoners is 'neither clean nor regular or easily accessed'.²¹⁶

Lira's lawyer applied for release on bail, which in the circumstances meant transfer to a standard civilian hospital for better treatment. The court decided that the SIZO medical unit was 'providing the accused with appropriate treatment and preventing possible complications or exacerbation of the disease', denied the bail application, and extended Lira's detention until 19 February 2024.²¹⁷ At this stage, Lira had about three weeks left to live.

In the undated note smuggled out of prison,²¹⁸ Lira concluded: 'I am about to undergo a procedure to reduce the edema [sic] pressure in my lungs, which is causing me extreme shortness of breath, to the point of passing out after minimal activity or even just talking for 2 minutes.'²¹⁹ The note was the last known communication from Lira. He died in prison custody on 12 January 2024. It is not known whether he had undergone the surgical procedure to relieve the oedema pressure, or was still awaiting it. It is not even possible to be certain that Lira had been told the truth about the surgery, since medical staff in the Ukrainian prison system are under the command of prison authorities and thus that of the Ukrainian government's Ministry of Justice,

[. . .] even though the prison doctors formally have been segregated from the prison administration in recent administrative reforms. The prison management is still able to blackmail the doctors by refusing to

²¹⁴ Danish Immigration Service, *Country of Origin Information report: Ukraine – Prison Conditions*, November 2021. See <<https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2064634/ukraine-prison-conditions-2021.pdf>> pp. 41, 101 and 72.

²¹⁵ Danish Immigration Service, 2021. See note 214 above, p. 41.

²¹⁶ Danish Immigration Service, 2021. See note 214 above, p. 39.

²¹⁷ Dzerzhinsky District Court of Kharkiv, Resolution dated 12/21/2023 [sic] in case 638/5519/23. See <<https://shorturl.at/ouvxD>> or <<https://opendatabot.ua/court/115866612-bb21da66535e6e38a7875762c16f61ff>> (source in Ukrainian).

²¹⁸ Widely published on social media in January 2024. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/lira-hospital-note>>.

²¹⁹ Lira refers to his medical condition as having been disclosed in court on 22 December. The date error is minor, and even given Ukraine's erratic court filing system, Lira's rapidly worsening health probably means he misremembered it.

provide services to the patients such as transfer to hospitals, or the doctors can be fired if they refuse to comply²²⁰ [. . .] Because of that prison doctors did not risk to go against the prison administration quite often. There were also cases where prison doctors refused not to record the injuries of the prisoners, and as a result hereof they were fired.²²¹

Even taken at face value, the repeated delays and the gradual extension of Lira's confinement are unusual. But taken in conjunction with the apparent cancellation of Lira's anticipated trial in September 2023 (see page 80 above) the successive delays and extensions look extremely dubious. If the case against Lira had been ready to go to trial in mid-September, as Sarah Ashton-Cirillo claimed, then it is natural to ask what reasons might have caused the case management hearings to drag on for another three months.

The Observatory of Democracy (OoD) is a Ukrainian NGO headquartered in Kharkiv. Its purpose is to monitor civil issues in eastern Ukraine that affect public policies and vice-versa, and it has specifically examined the practices and performance of local courts in the city. OoD research has demonstrated that high-profile court cases in Kharkiv are frequently subject to lengthy and unwarranted delays. The OoD refers to this phenomenon as 'dragging' and remarks that it often occurs as a result of improper political pressure applied on the judiciary. The OoD's conclusion is that this dragging allows 'interested persons' to wait for the media to slowly become distracted from covering controversial court cases. The OoD remarks: 'After some time, no matter what decision has been taken [by the court], it is not going to become widely publicized in the media.'²²²

The Observatory of Democracy has specifically commented on procedural irregularities affecting several high-profile court cases in the Kharkiv oblast. Approached for comment on the Gonzalo Lira case, the Observatory consulted with its founder in the USA, and then declined to comment. The Observatory stated that Lira's situation 'falls outside the scope of our focus'.

One landmark case brought before the European Court of Human Rights²²³ bears many striking resemblances to the circumstances in which Lira died. It involved the deliberate 'dragging' and delaying of procedures, until the victim eventually died in custody. The ECtHR had no qualms about describing the

²²⁰ Danish Immigration Service, 2021. See note 214 above, p. 42.

²²¹ Danish Immigration Service, 2021. See note 214 above, p. 78.

²²² Observatory of Democracy, *Analysis of Kharkiv regional court system*, n.d. 2017. See <<https://od.org.ua/en/экспресс-анализ-судебной-системы-хар/>>.

²²³ ECtHR, *Kats and Others v. Ukraine*; no. 29971/04; Judgment of 18 March 2009. See <<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-90362>>.

death as one that had been *prima facie* suspicious at the time it happened. The Ukrainian state was found to have caused the slow death of a SIZO prisoner through medical neglect, and to have deliberately failed to investigate its own wrongdoing, a failure which included the creation of false testimony to lay down an alibi. Olga Biliak (b. 1971) was held on remand in April 2003, and her already-deteriorating health was allowed to worsen over a period of at least 40 consecutive days until she eventually died in February 2004.



Olga Biliak

Biliak noted in writing that although she had developed two separate cases of double pneumonia, months apart,²²⁴ the SIZO's attendant physicians repeatedly deemed her fit to remain in custody. On three separate occasions, Biliak asked for treatment because her legs were visibly swollen but the SIZO medics said each time there was nothing wrong with her. On the day of Biliak's third denied request for treatment, another SIZO physician diagnosed pyelonephritis, a kidney infection which commonly causes swelling of the lower leg.²²⁵ Biliak was still classified as sufficiently healthy to remain in detention just 40 minutes before she died of advanced bilateral pleurisy, an inflammation of the lungs concomitant to pneumonia.²²⁶

Like Gonzalo Lira, Olga Biliak could have been transferred out of SIZO for specialist medical care in a non-prison hospital at any stage during her ordeal. Instead the prison had stood by and passively watched her go into a terminal decline. Worse still, she was being illegally held in custody long after she should have been released, the prosecution case against her having been abandoned. Biliak's parents and her own son maintained that Olga had been the victim of a malicious prosecution by police officers of the Kyiv narcotics division, who had unsuccessfully tried to coerce her into re-selling ('fencing') drugs they had confiscated. The family felt that this was the reason Olga Biliak had been allowed to die in captivity. The ECtHR noted that the family had repeatedly tried to get Ukrainian authorities to investigate the alleged police corruption, but had been consistently rebuffed.²²⁷ ECtHR reiterated that 'when a detainee dies in suspicious circumstances', Article 2 of the Convention requires a signatory state

²²⁴ *Kats and Others v. Ukraine*. See note 223 above, paragraphs 25 and 31.

²²⁵ *Kats and Others v. Ukraine*. See note 223 above, paragraph 30.

²²⁶ *Kats and Others v. Ukraine*. See note 223 above, paragraph 46.

²²⁷ *Kats and Others v. Ukraine*. See note 223 above, paragraphs 19 and 20.

to proactively initiate 'an official and effective investigation capable of establishing the causes of death and identifying and punishing those responsible [. . .]'.²²⁸

Some indication of the extent of the Ukrainian state's criminality, as determined in the ECtHR ruling on the Olga Biliak case, is provided by the fact that Ukraine's own domestic legislation already contains specific provision for medical malpractice and misconduct. Unlike many other jurisdictions, Ukraine recognises medical crimes of omission, because workers in healthcare settings are actively required to perform their life-saving duties.²²⁹ In particular, a medical worker's failure to provide assistance to a patient is an offence under Article 139 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine; improper performance of professional duties by a medical worker is an offence under Article 140; and violation of a patient's rights is an offence under Article 141.²³⁰

Healthcare personnel who violate medical laws can be subject to both civil and criminal penalties.²³¹

Medical crimes are not rare in Ukraine. A 2017 review of medical malpractice cases in two Ukrainian oblasts suggests that 8.2 per cent of Ukraine's medical malpractice cases objectively meet the threshold of criminal culpability.²³² A later study, at the national level, found that while Ukrainian prosecutions for medical malpractice are few and far between, 80.9 per cent of

²²⁸ *Kats and Others v. Ukraine*. See note 223 above, paragraph 113.

²²⁹ This extra standard is found in the laws of several other Eastern European countries, and reflects their experiences of Soviet rule, when medical rules and procedures were sometimes invoked to mistreat, persecute, and silence political troublemakers.

²³⁰ Serhiy Volodymyrovych Knysh, 'Legal liability for offenses in the health care sphere in Ukraine', *Law and Safety*, 71(4), 2018, pp. 44-46. See <<http://pb.univd.edu.ua/index.php/PB/article/view/209>>. Archived at <<https://shorturl.at/nAN36> or <<https://archive.org/details/knysh-serhiy-legal-provision-for-crimes-in-the-fields-of-health-protection-in-ukraine>> (source in Ukrainian).

²³¹ The penalty for medical negligence that causes death of a patient is 'deprivation of the right to occupy certain positions or engage in certain activities for a term up to five years, or correctional labour for a term up to two years, or restraint of liberty for a term up to two years, or imprisonment for the same term.' If this seems lenient, the reasoning is that the inevitability of the punishment rather than its severity is a sufficient deterrent. Part of this reasoning is the highly-debatable notion that severe punishments for crimes of omission would have negative consequences for the medical professions. Guturova *et al*, 'Medical negligence subject to criminal law' in *Journal of the Polish Medical Society*, Volume 72, December 2019. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/medical-negligence-subject-to-criminal-law-2019>>

²³² Viktor Franchuk, 'Medical malpractice in contemporary Ukraine: Forensic-medical retrospective review', in *Folia Societatis Medicinae Legalis Slovaca*, Volume 2, 2017. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/franchuk-medical-malpractice-in-ukraine>>.

such prosecutions result in convictions.²³³ Failure to investigate the suspicious death of a patient under medical supervision can also constitute a procedural violation of both Article Two and Article Three of the European Convention on Human Rights, as discussed above.

The main exemption from criminal liability for Ukrainian healthcare workers is satisfied when a patient refuses treatment, since the patient has the constitutional right to inviolability. This may be the reason that, soon after Gonzalo Lira died, and in the absence of any other official statement about the cause of his death, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo used weasel wording to insinuate that he had effectively committed suicide by deliberately allowing himself to die while under medical supervision.

Gonzalo Lira died because he was a chain-smoking past-middle aged man who was not in the healthiest conditions. And sometimes, that leads to death. Especially when someone refuses to, *maybe*, ask for or get the necessary medical treatment. (Emphasis added.)²³⁴

It is self-evident that Ashton-Cirillo was deliberately misleading her audience with this irrelevant and ambiguous remark. It hardly needs to be added that smokers, even heavy smokers, do not spontaneously develop double pneumonia as a result of their addiction. Pneumonia is the result of infection from external sources. These are abundant in the Ukrainian prison system and prison medical facilities (discussed on page 91 above).

Ashton-Cirillo was playing on the ignorance of her social media audience. She was acting as a spokesperson for the Ukrainian state at the time she made these indefensible remarks.²³⁵ Taking her deceitful statements in conjunction with the SIZO prison's failure to declare Gonzalo Lira's worsening illness in the months prior to his death (see pages 91 and 92 above), it can be stated that the Ukrainian state was, at the very least, complicit in a cover-up of the reasons

²³³ Bodnar *et al*, 'Analysis of Final Judgments in Cases of Medical Negligence in Ukraine', *Wiadomości Lekarskie (Medical Advances)*, Volume 71, January 2018. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/franchuk-medical-malpractice-in-ukraine>>.

²³⁴ Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, 'Hypocrisy, paranoia, cowardice and the truth surrounding Gonzalo Lira and Ukraine', Twitter.com, 12 January 2024. See <<https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1dRKZEDkLbvxB>> Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/ashton-cirillo-broadcast-13-january-2024>>.

²³⁵ When the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG) lodged a formal complaint about abysmal health conditions in the Ukrainian prison system during a measles epidemic, a government official responded with a remark analogous to Ashton-Cirillo's: 'Commenting on your delusion, we explain that sometimes people get sick.' The KHPG called this response 'not worthy of a state institution'. KHPG Report, *Prisoners' rights to health protection and medical care in 2014-2021*, published 18 June 2021. See <<https://khp.org/en/1608809232>>.

for Lira's premature death.

Within one week of Lira's death, Ashton-Cirillo was interviewed by Resolute Square, a political broadcaster based in the US. It calls itself 'a Public Benefit Corporation dedicated to promoting democratic values', and, as its self-description makes clear, that means 'Democratic' with a capital D.²³⁶ As the interview unrolled, Ashton-Cirillo quietly abandoned her assertions that Lira had been a Russian agent or asset. Burying her retractions in another flurry of excuses that blamed Lira for his own death, Ashton-Cirillo renounced every single one of the accusations she had made against him, while still attempting to make him seem guilty of something undefined.

Gonzalo Lira was a *would-be* Russian agent, *would-be* Russian asset who died in Kharkiv, Ukraine, after having been in the custody of the Ukrainian authorities as he was awaiting trial. He was a middle-aged, in his mid-50s, chain-smoking antivaxer who is now being held up as this icon of journalism [. . .] and ultimately this was just a guy who came to Ukraine, tried to add on to his gift, and lived an unhealthy life . . . got imprisoned for, for working with, uh, *trying to work with* the Russians and working with the Russians *in . . . in . . . in some regards, not to the extent that he had hoped to* [. . .] (Emphases added.)²³⁷

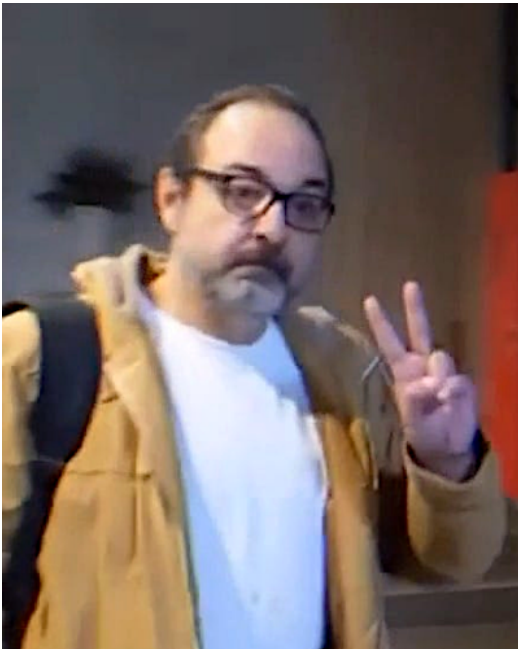
Ashton-Cirillo's story had changed because her audience had changed. Up until this point, she had been promoting a fiction to her Ukrainian target audience, knowing that it would indirectly reach the wider world. But now that she was being directly interviewed by a US political entity for a US domestic audience, Ashton-Cirillo knew her propaganda narrative was unsustainable. Instead, she had to equivocate, and rely on innuendos and ambiguities. She could insult the intelligence of Ukrainians, and parrot the propaganda messaging of a foreign country while on that country's territory, but she did not have the option of behaving the same way toward her own political party, or the country she served.

The Ukrainian military was asked to account for Ashton-Cirillo's retraction of her false claims about Lira. A spokesman refused to comment.

When Georgiy Gongadze was murdered by Ukraine in 2000 (see page 76 above) the appalled international response was loud, and lasted for years. The USA, UN, and European Union all pressed for investigations and explanations, and Ukraine was repeatedly condemned by body after official body. When

²³⁶ See <<https://resolutesquare.com/about-us>>.

²³⁷ Resolute Square, 'Zero Line: The Kremlin's Propaganda Playbook', YouTube.com, 18 January 2023. See <<https://youtu.be/Fd8alnfej54>> commencing at 2m 20s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/resolute-square-18-january-2024>>.



Lira being led away after his arrest.

Gonzalo Lira died in suspicious circumstances while in Ukrainian custody, there was no response at all. The closest the US government has come to officially commenting on Lira's death is a response provided to the Washington DC bureau of Russian news agency TASS.²³⁸ Not even a fortnight later, on 24 January 2024, the State Department's principal deputy spokesman told a press briefing that he was unaware of Lira's death.²³⁹

On the other hand, when Russian dissident Alexander Navalny died in Russian captivity, a month after Lira's own death, the US was quick to accuse Russia of murder, and repeatedly reminded the public of

Russia's demonstrable history of cruelty and oppression. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Navalny's death was a convenient *cause célèbre* for US propaganda purposes, and that Lira's death while in the hands of a supposedly friendly state was precisely the opposite. Lira's squalid demise was an unfortunate disruption, to be downplayed and ignored for the sake of political expediency. One might even describe the US response as a form of what is known in Ukraine as 'dragging'. (See page 92 above.)

The US Department of State was asked what communication had taken place with the Ukrainian government concerning Lira's deteriorating health. The Department of State was also asked whether the US federal government would contribute to any Ukrainian inquiry into the circumstances of Lira's death. The Department of State responded:

We take our role in assisting U.S. citizens abroad seriously and provide all appropriate assistance. When a U.S. citizen dies abroad, the Department provides all appropriate consular assistance to the family and friends. When a U.S. citizen dies in a foreign country, local authorities are responsible for determining the cause of death and issuing a death certificate. Our assistance may include visiting with a detained citizen, facilitating communication on the citizen's needs and well-being, and engaging with local government authorities, including on matters

²³⁸ TASS, 13 January 2024. See <<https://tass.com/world/1731827>>.

²³⁹ US Department of State, *Department Press Briefing*, 22 January 2024. See <<https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-january-22-2024/>>.

related to providing appropriate health care.

Once the Embassy was aware of Mr. Lira's health concerns, we were in frequent communication with the local detention center about his condition and medical treatment. Consular staff were in repeated contact with Mr. Lira to monitor his health concerns and to relay those concerns to his detention center. When we learned that Mr. Lira's condition had become more serious, the Embassy spoke with his medical professionals on a daily basis to monitor his health and treatment.

We further engaged the Ukrainian government to ensure Mr. Lira was receiving all proper and necessary medical attention. Due to Russia's war against Ukraine, consular officers could not to visit Mr. Lira in person in Kharkiv. We refer further questions on detention and medical care to the respective Ukrainian authorities.

Out of respect for Mr. Lira and his family we have no further details to provide.

We reiterate our message that U.S. citizens should not travel to Ukraine due to the active armed conflict.

Ukraine's prisons, including SIZO remand facilities and their medical wards, are administered by the government's Ministry of Justice. The Ministry was therefore approached about its current position concerning the death of Gonzalo Lira, and was specifically asked whether there is, has been, or will be an investigation to establish the circumstances in which he died.

The Ministry of Justice declined to comment.