

Putin's best friend and Lukashenko's wallet

Conflict between Russia and Ukraine

Thanks to being a mediator in these negotiations, Minsk has mend fences with western countries. Thus Belarus got its own financial profit, which, however, was flowing directly into the businessman's hands.

Who and how cherry-picks the political decisions between Kiev, Moscow and Minsk? In our new article we present a joint investigation conducted with the help of the famous Ukranian programme "Schemes".

Old partner of Kremlin

New political scandal and tension escalating between Moscow and Kiev. Ukraine authorities placed the main pro-Russian politician from Ukraine Viktor Medvedchuk under arrest. He was suspected of attempting to rob national resources in Crimea, passing the state secret information to Russian intel agents and anti-ukrainian organisations.



Viktor Medvedchuk. Photo credit: <https://www.facebook.com/MEDVEDCHUKVV/>

Putin comments on the events in the neighbor country at the Security Council meeting:

“These decisions are clearly political and have only one goal - to wipe out the forces that promote peaceful solutions to end the crisis in the south-east of Ukraine, Donbass and neighbourly relations with Russia. These issues must remain taken into account and we, keeping the threats in mind , would react accordingly”.



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VLADIMIR PUTIN

Arrested Viktor Medvedchuk is not only a political partner of the Kremlin but also a close friend of Putin. Vladimir Putin and Medvedev’s wife are Medvedchuk’s daughter godparents. In 2009 Putin wrote a wonderful composition dedicated to Medvedchuk (the essay was published in “Glavred” magazine). Later the President said that he met Medvedchuk when the latter worked as the President’s chief of staff between 2000 and 2005 (at that time Leonid Kuchma was the second President of independent Ukraine). Medvedchuk’s main partner used to be Dmitry Medvedev as he was the President’s chief of staff in Russia respectively. “They still get along well” - pointed out Vladimir Putin in 2017.

This year Medvedchuk entered “Forbes” list of the wealthiest people in Ukraine. Ukrainian media report that he invested his assets into growing the political importance of his pro-russian party “Opposition platform for life”. As a rule, these assets were registered to his wife, TV-host Oxana Marchenko, and his partners. The field of his business interest is rather big: from media and properties to metallurgy and fuel and energy complex. For instance, in Russia he owns an oil-processing business. According to “Forbes”, his assets are worth \$620 mln.



Виктор Медведчук

ТЭК, медиа, металлургия, недвижимость

\$620 млн **12 место**
100 богатейших украинцев
2021

Профайл

Возраст 66

Место рождения поселок Почет,
Красноярский край
(Россия)

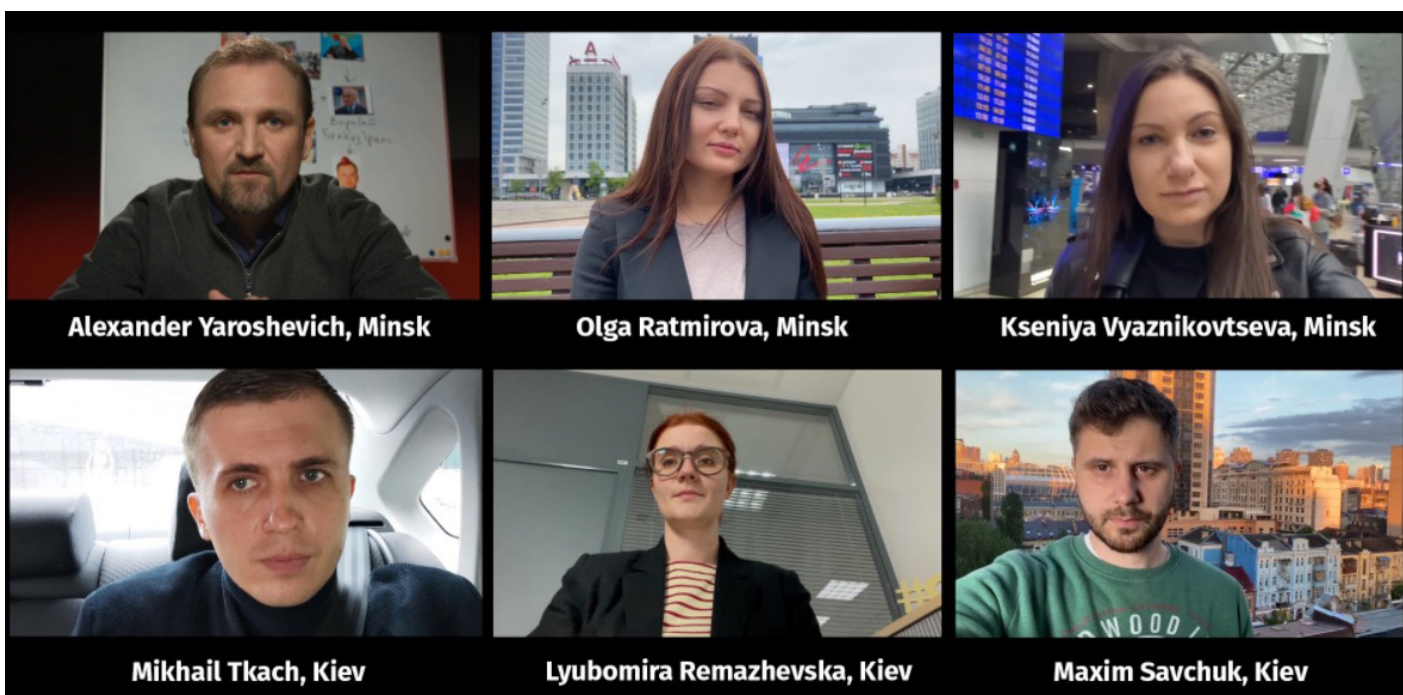
“Forbes” magazine. Photo credit: <https://forbes.ua/>

Our joint investigation with the Ukrainian programme “Schemes” found out that Medvedchuk had a helping hand in Belarus too. Media repeatedly reported about his alleged business relationship with businessman Nikolay Vorobey.



Nikolay Vorobey. Photo credit: TUT.BY

However, our team managed to figure out that these relations are much deeper and have a protection racket that is much more authoritative than we assumed. Firstly, our Ukrainian colleagues from the programme asked us to assist in gathering the information about the Belarusian businessman. During our correspondence we came to a decision to write material together.



Banded by one pipeline

It was the year 2019 amidst the elections in Ukraine. Presidential and parliamentary campaigns rolled out while Medvedchuk was having meetings with Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow, and with Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi.



On top of this, he even met Lukashenko twice in Minsk.



Alexander Lukashenko meeting Viktor Medvedchuk. Photo credit: <https://president.gov.by/>

Official reason to visit Minsk was to attend a meeting upon settling the conflict in Donbass. But Ukrainian Ambassador Igor Kizim didn't happen to see him there.

“It astounds me too and makes me wonder because he is the participant of the Trilateral contact group. I've not seen him for a one and a half since I moved to Minsk. Of course, he might meet with the participants. But in my humble opinion, he has no right to be called the participant of the group.”, - says Igor Kizim in his interview to TUT.BY.

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IGOR KIZIM
UKRAINIAN AMBASSADOR

Ukrainian Ambassador thinks that Medvedchuk might have discussed business issues with Lukashenko. Indeed, in spring 2019 right after the meeting mentioned above, Nikolay Vorobey bought a part of the pipeline “Samara Westbound”, which pumps oil from Russia through Belarus to Ukraine and to the EU.

The director of Consulting Group “A-95” Sergey Kuyun comments: “Ukrainian politics and business associations understand that Nikolay Vorobey couldn't have made such a decision unless it was authorised from above. Projects that are closely tied with politics and the interests of the Russian Federation can't be an individual decision”.

After the Soviet Union collapse the pipeline belonged to Russian “TransOil”. Three years before it was purchased by Vorobey, it belonged to the little-known Swiss company “International Trading Partners AG”. Anatoly Shefer was its beneficiary.

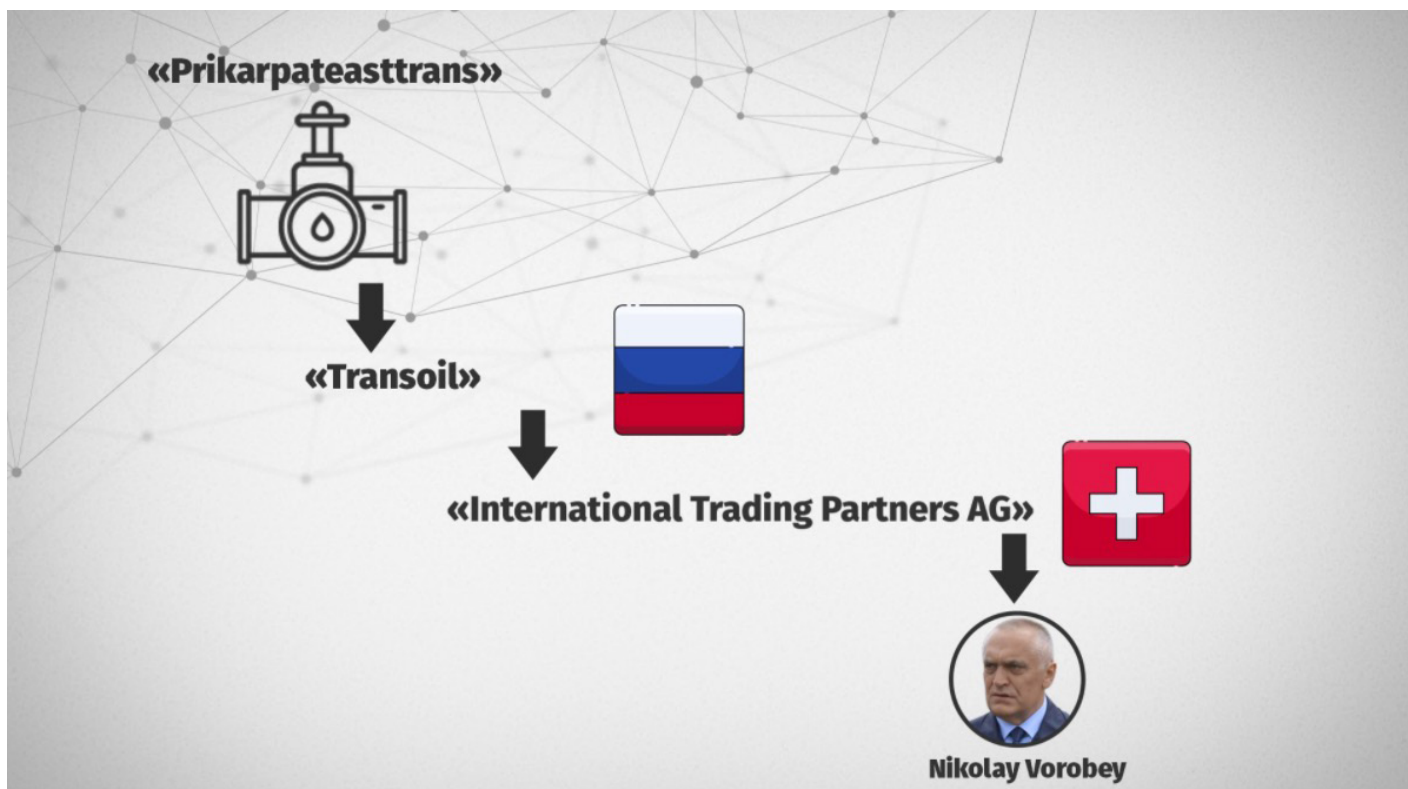
Ukrainian specialists believe that this unknown Anatoly was simply a nominal owner.

“I have never met anyone who knows him. Even among businessmen he is a dark horse. But people say that the purchase and its active work in 2016 are tightly connected with pro-russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk. He is doing his utmost to deny his involvement in this project, but according to the media, he has some sort of involvement. In general, we realise that amidst the blood bathing war in Ukraine it's really tough to start a project like that one”, - says Sergey Kuyun.

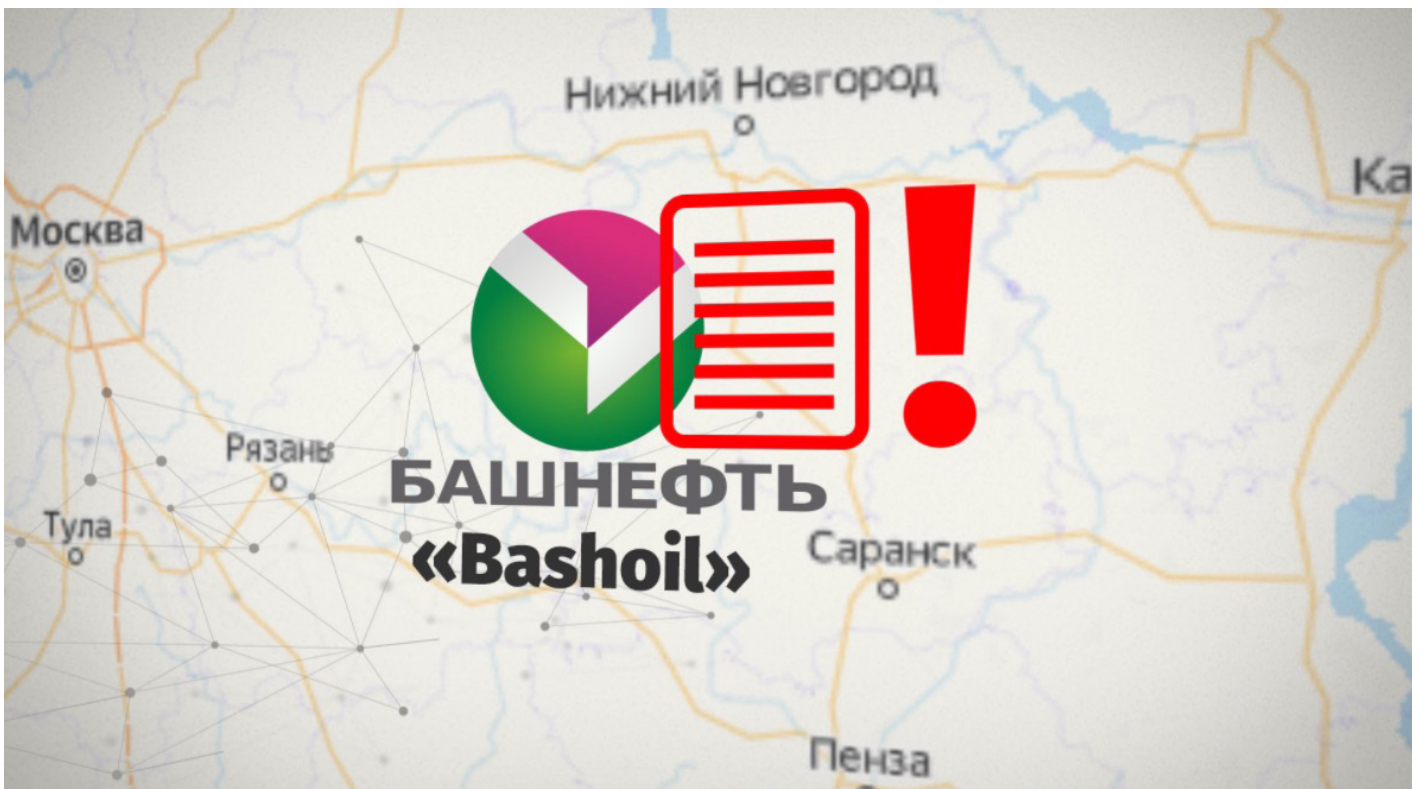
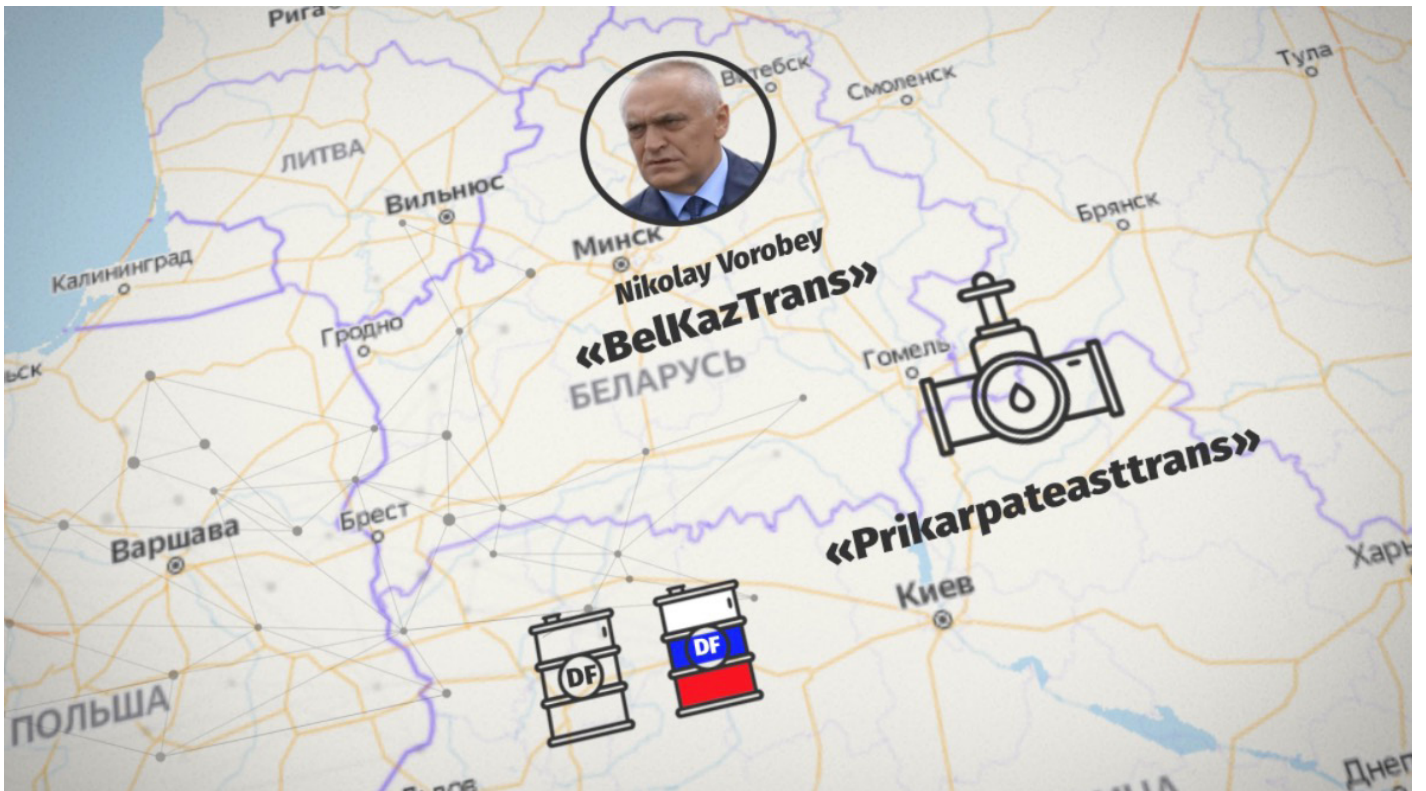
Sanctions-busting oil schemes

Once the pipeline was bought, Nikolay Vorobey told TUT.BY that he was going to supply belarusian oil products to Ukraine. But in reality, the pipeline was used to pump diesel fuel from Russia to the “Wexler Group”, which is somehow connected with Medvedchuk.

Nikolay Vorobey took his part in this supply. During the previous year his Minsk company “BelKazTrans” imported diesel oil to Ukraine mainly of Russian origin.



The manufacturer turned out to be Russian company “Bashneft” that has been under Ukrainian sanctions since 2016.

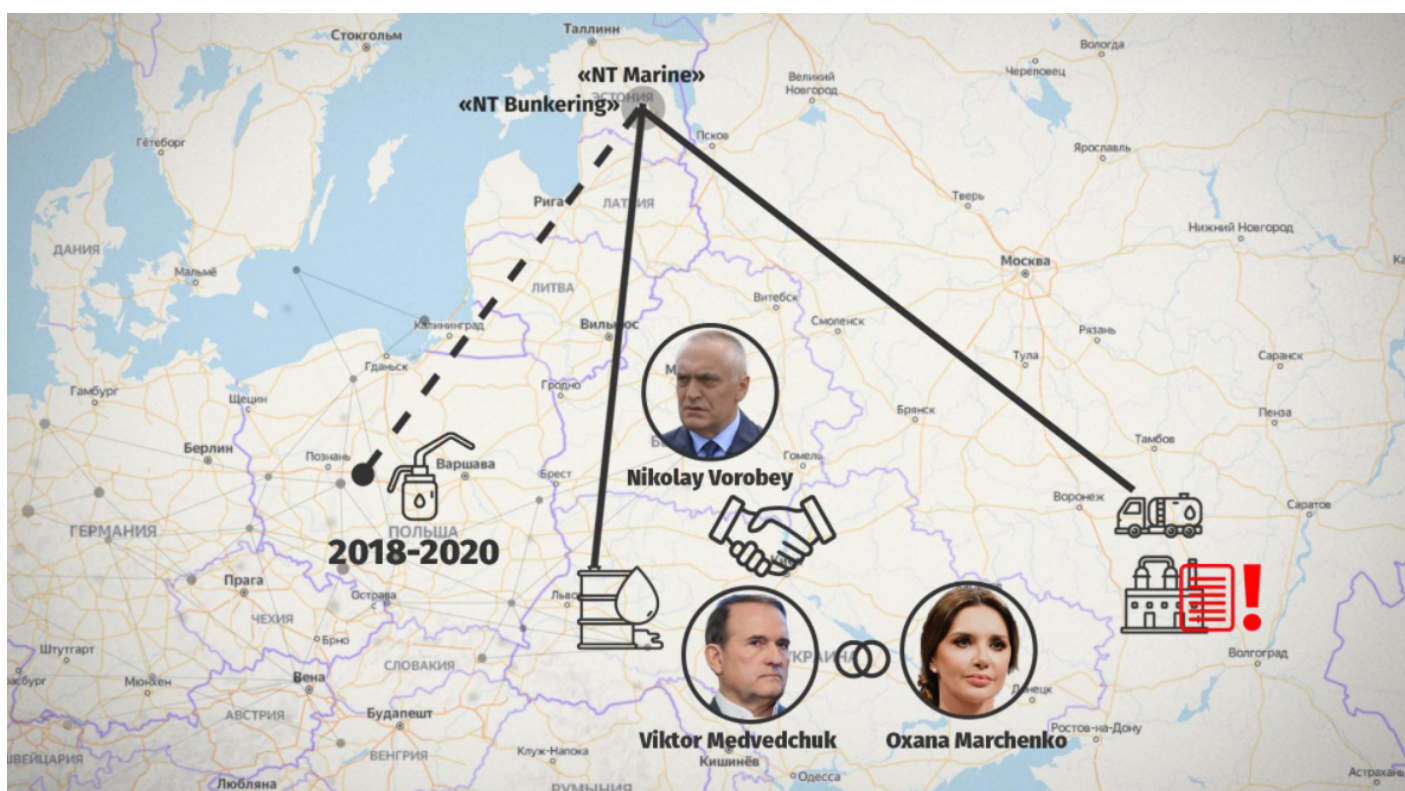


The recipients were the companies related to Medvedchuk: "AnviTrade" and "Glusco Ukraina". In other words, Vorobey acted as a mediator so that they could supply sanctioned oil to the leader of pro-russian political wing in Ukraine.



Alexander Sirenko, the chief-editor of Ukrainian publishing “NaftoRynok”: “Unfortunately, sanctions haven’t been proven to work well that’s why sanctioned products appear on the Ukrainian market”.

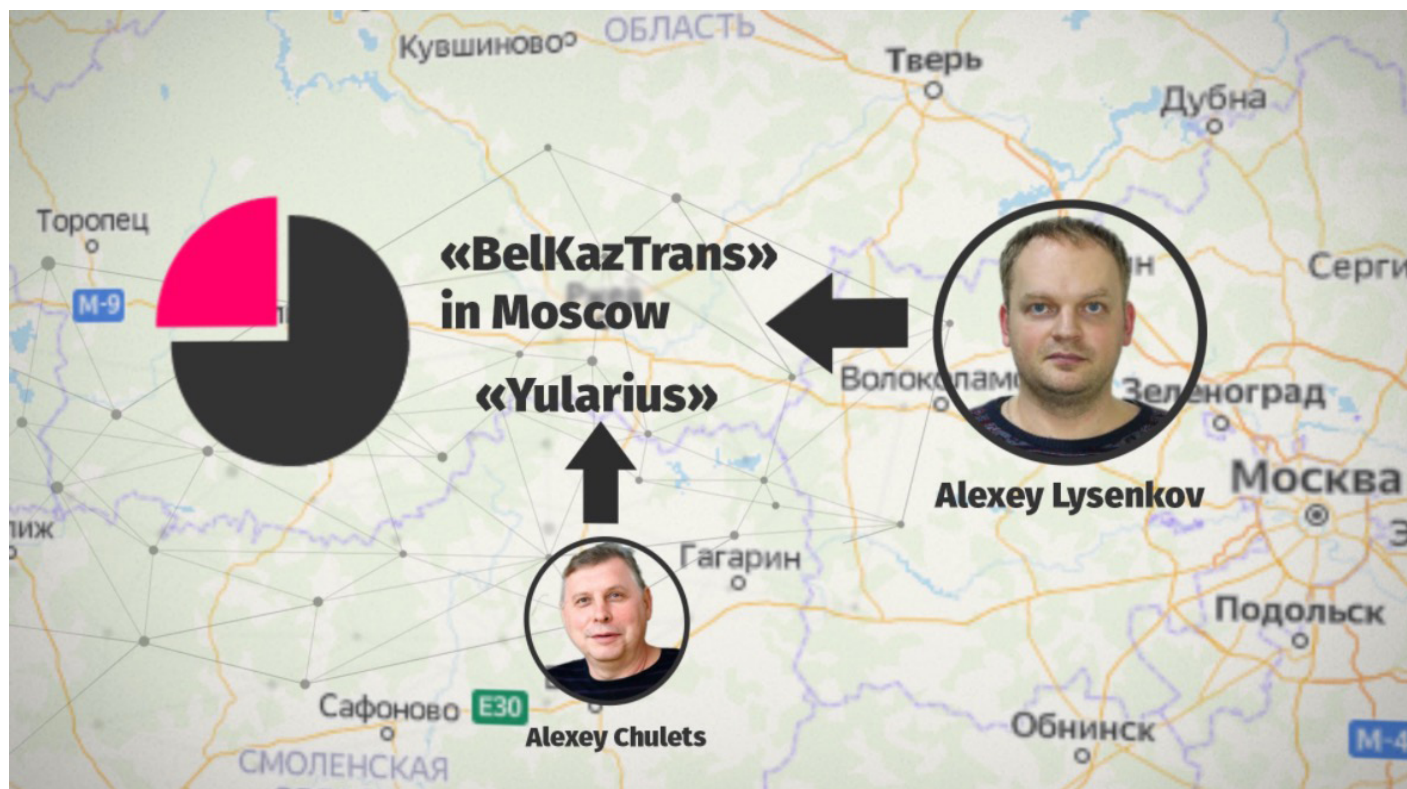
Another cunning scheme was executed through Estonia. Oxana Marchenko had an oil processing plant in Novoshakhtinsk, Rostov region. As we managed to find out, oil products from this plant went to Ukraine through estonian company “NT Marine”, road oil in particular. Another estonian enterprise “NT Bunkering” was importing light distillates from a factory in Novoshakhtinsk to Europe from 2018 to 2020. At the beginning of this year Ukraine imposed sanctions on this plant for their fuel supplies to Donetsk and Luhansk separatists.



Alexander Sidorenko has his point on it:

“Working with DNR and LNR is a crime. You would be called on that. Sanctions, bans, and attrition are the appropriate measures. If somebody is bigheaded, then the evidence base and court actions will be brought into force.”

Estonian companies, with the help of which oil products from Novoshakhtinsk went to Ukraine and Europe, comply with a businessman Alexey Chulets, who turns out to be Vorobey’s partner.



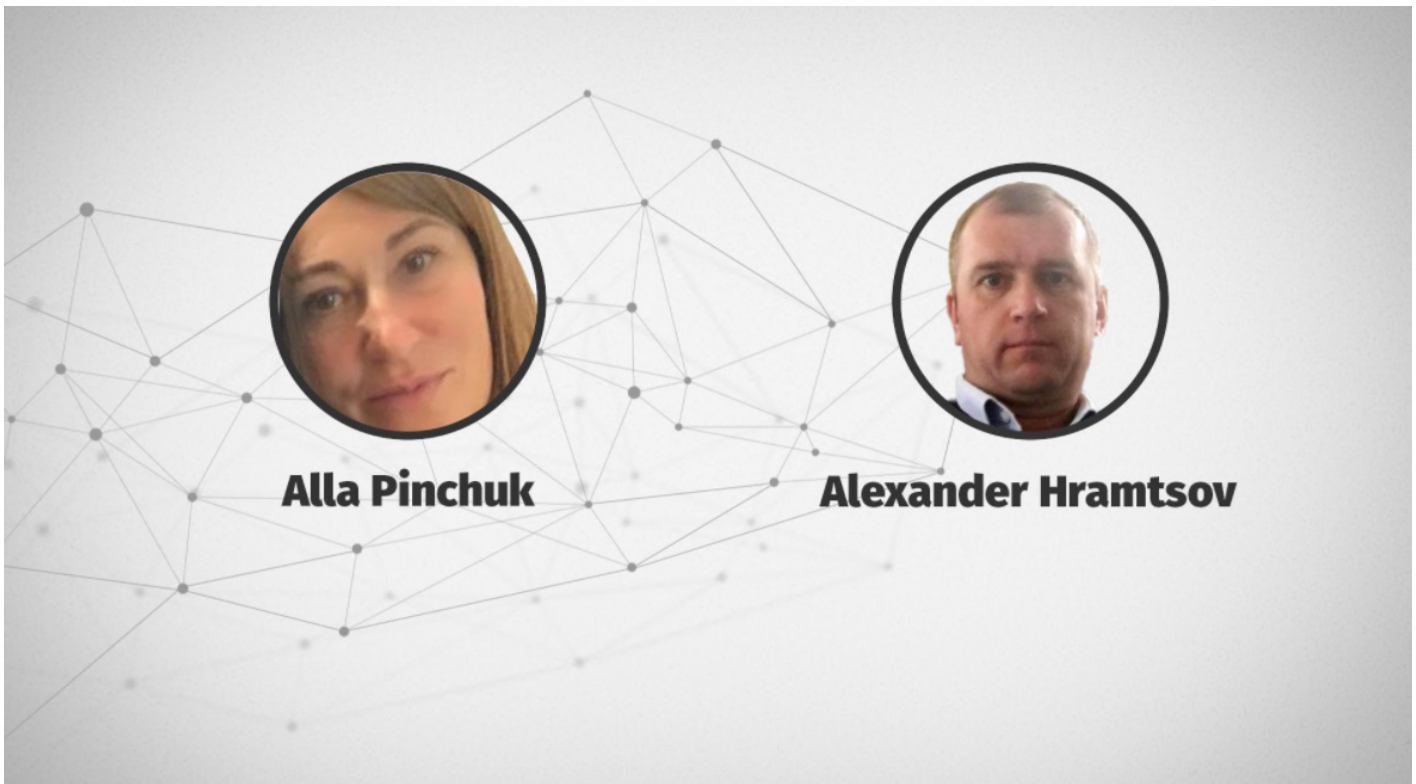
Both of their assets in Moscow are being controlled by Alexey Lysenkov. He is the director of “BelKazTrans” in Moscow, owned by Vorobey and at the same time - a firm “Yularius” , which is under Chulets’s control. Along with that, he is a shareholder of both of these two companies.

Money of the party

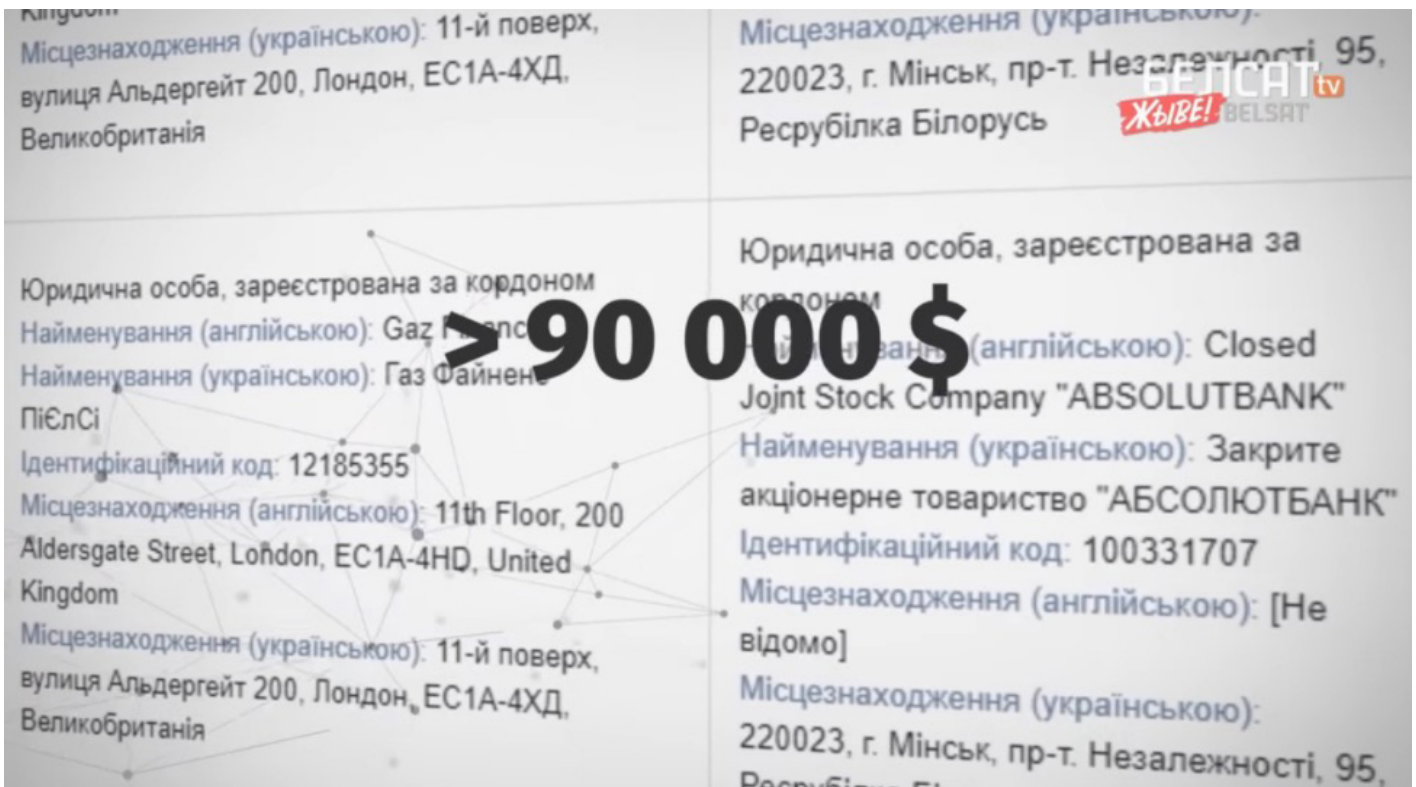
Also Vorobey helped the Ukrainian party “OPZZH” to grow political influence in Ukraine. For the last three years Medvedchuk’s associate Taras Kozak has bought three networks: “112 Ukraine”, “News One” and “Zik”. The deals on the two of them happened with the help of “Absolut Bank” owned by Vorobey.

As our investigation found out, this year Taras Kozak used the services of a private business-jet “Embraer Legacy 650” and was on board together with Vorobey’s managers Alla Pinchuk and Alexandr Khramtsov. The price of the plane itself is about \$50 mln., while the flight costs €20.000.

“However, if it was a private jet given to them as a sign of courtesy, they might haven’t paid”, - says Mikhail Tkach, journalist at “Schemes” in Ukraine.



Apart from that, Medvedchuk and his wife hold their funds in Belarus. They have accounts in “Absolut Bank”, where the former keeps €48.000 and his wife €108.000. Oxana Marchenko has two trust accounts worth \$10mln and €2mln. “AbsolutBank” also keeps Gazprom subsidiary shares for Medvedchuk in the UK and in 2019 gave Medvedchuk a fee worth more than \$90.000.





Viktor Medvedchuk and Oxana Marchenko. Photo credit: [instagram.com/oksana.marchenko.official/](https://www.instagram.com/oksana.marchenko.official/)

The question why Medvedchuk makes his key deals through Belarus remains. In 2019, when the collaboration just started, the new President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelenskiy has begun to apply pressure against Russian representatives in Ukraine.

“We’ve got a lot to ask Medvedchuk about; whether it is his own party or it is just a temporary one. Also we wonder where he gets funds for the party and his networks. We have some ideas about the origin of cash flow and it’s going to be a real scandal with a very bad ending.” - says Zelensky in his interview to “1+1” network.

This year Ukraine authorities ground Taras Kozak’s networks to a halt. Officially, he is suspected of receiving funds from coal deals in Donbass. Medvedchuk meanwhile remains under house arrest due to being suspected of high treason and theft of the country’s resources in Crimea. The pipeline bought by Vorobey was seized and given to the government company “UkrTransNaft”.

Lock on transit

Of course, Russian and Belarusian authorities allow Medvedchuk more than that. He is the only individual entrepreneur who is given the green light to export oil products manufactured from russian oil in Mozyr and Novopolotsk factories.

Until now government entities “Belarus oil company” and “BelZarubezhTorg” were the only ones in charge of exporting belarusian oil products. But the situation has changed and the major part of belarusian fuel flows to Europe.

Another deal that Vorobey was given to cherry-pick is russian coal transportation.

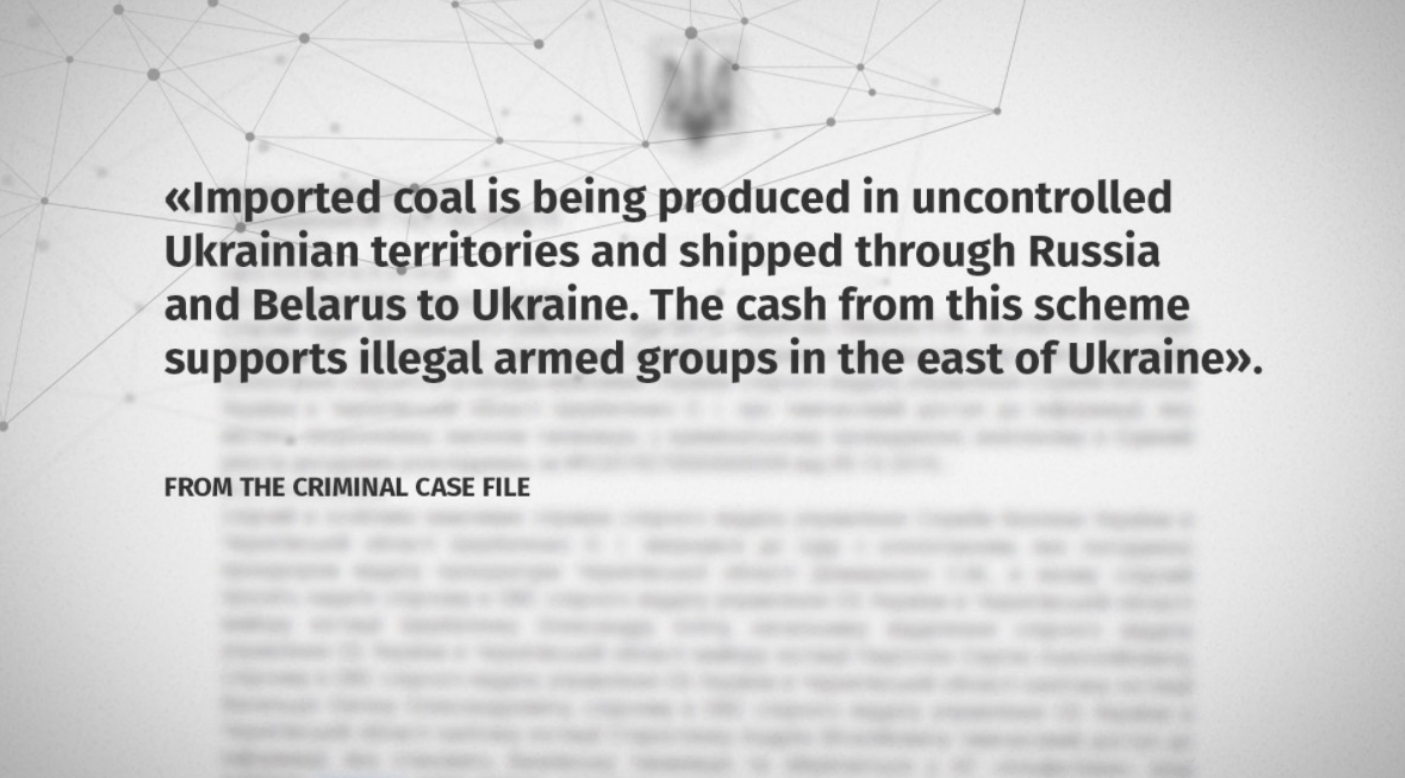
Few years later after the conflict in the Donbass, Belarus started to scale up coal supply to Ukraine, becoming one of the top three leaders in 2019. They managed to ship more than 2.5 mln. tons even though Belarus doesn’t have hard coal output.



> 2 500 000 t

Leonid Hazanov, industry expert makes his point on the situation: “Belarus itself doesn’t use that much coal, only about 700.000-800.000 tons per year. Thus, belarusian companies greatly benefit from market conditions”.

Market players didn’t rule out the idea that fuel from occupied territories from Donbass and Luhansk regions might have come along. So the Ukrainian Security Service initiated some criminal proceedings where belarusian transit companies were involved.



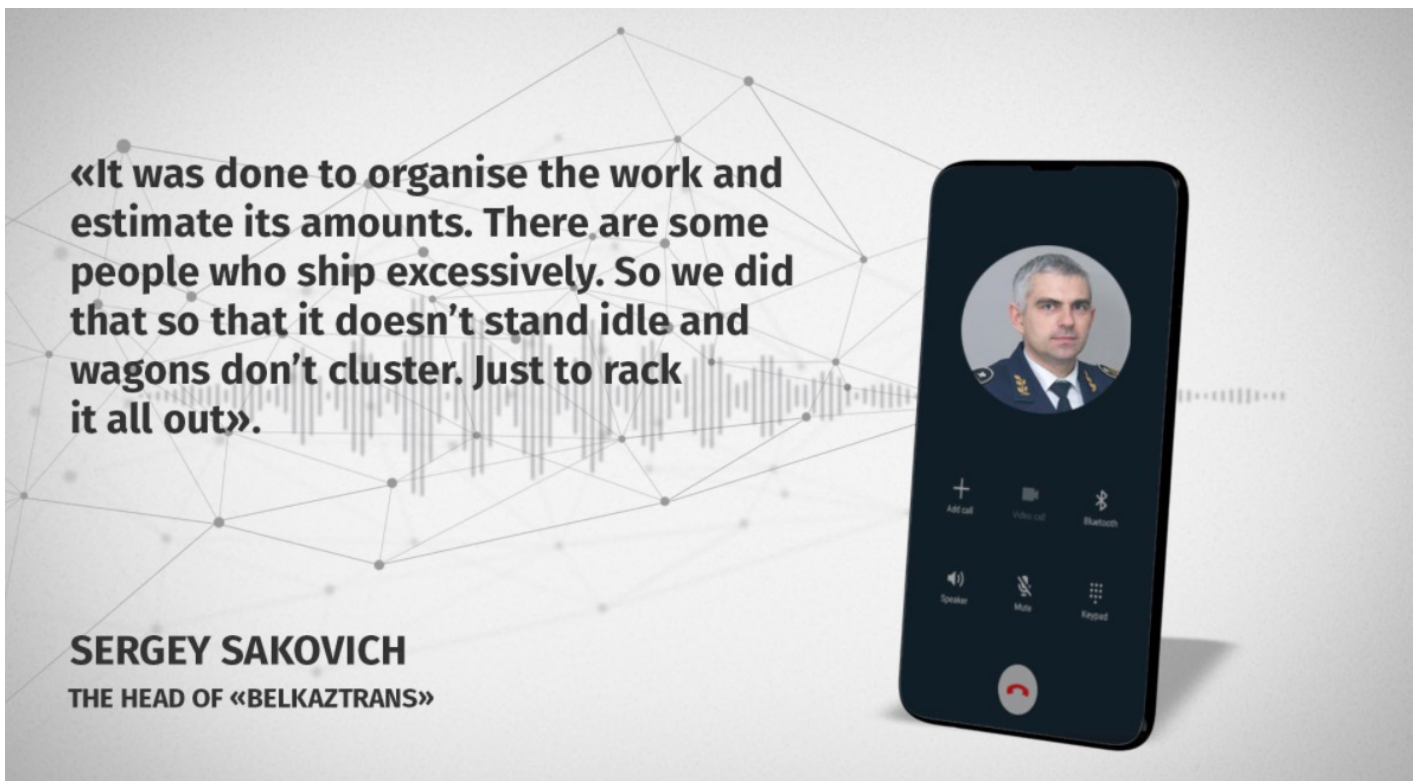
«Imported coal is being produced in uncontrolled Ukrainian territories and shipped through Russia and Belarus to Ukraine. The cash from this scheme supports illegal armed groups in the east of Ukraine».

FROM THE CRIMINAL CASE FILE

This is the excerpt from one of the criminal cases: “Imported coal is being produced in uncontrolled Ukrainian territories and shipped through Russia and Belarus to Ukraine. The cash from this scheme supports illegal armed groups in the east of Ukraine”.

At the end of 2019 some sort of coal industry remaking happened. The exclusive rights to ship russian coal through Belarus was given to “BelKazTrans” owned by Vorobey. Russian railway didn’t agree on the documents for coal transporters if another company was credited as a transporter in the documents. Market players claim that this order came from the Kremlin.

The Head of “BelKazTrans” Sergey Sakovich in his commentary to Naviny.by tried to explain the order:



“It was done to organise the work and estimate its amounts. There are some people who ship excessively. So we did that so that it doesn’t stand idle and wagons don’t cluster. Just to rack it all out”.

Until now “BelKazTrans” remains the only expeditor of russian coal through Belarus. Thanks to special conditions the company managed to become the leader in the logistics market. It makes the third top revenue in the first 100 successful expeditors after “STA Logistic” and “Belarus railway BTCL”. One year before it took the 6th place.

“If Nikolay Vorobey has tight connections with Belarus authorities, then there is no big deal to solve the issue of exclusive coal transit from Russia to Ukraine. As well as that he might also ask to ban some people from doing the same business”, - says Leonid Hazanov.

A similar situation exists in Ukraine. There a monopoly on shipment was given to “BelKazTrans Ukraine”. However, local expeditors, unlike in Belarus, are not eager to deal with it.

The Ukrainian market used to be ground to a halt for a while. “BelKazTrans didn’t have an agreement with Ukrainian railway. Now, according to tax reporting analysis, the major part of expenses covers “Ukrainian railway” fee services. Those who pay are big manufacturers that comply with local oligarchs. That is said “BelKazTrans Ukraine” takes the lead in the logistics industry.

“According to our company’s information, this company transits the greatest amounts of coal. I mean that no other company can be authorised to ship hard coal by railway”, - this comment was given by the Head of FIATA Viktor Berestenko.

Russian railway refused to give any comments in this regard.

Ukrainian family and coal tar spike

The main beneficiary of “BelKazTrans” is Nikolay Vorobey. First, we decided that it was the belarusian businessman himself. But during our joint investigation we found out that the first Vorobey’s wife Tatiana Terekhova lives in Ukraine, who has two children together with Nikolay: Sergey And Nikolay Junior.



**Nikolay Vorobey
Junior**

Sergey Vorobey

Apart from belarusian oligarch’s son, his daughter-in-law is also involved in this business. She owns half of “UrkBelOilProduct” at Ivan-Frankovsk that operates in the area of oil products trades.

But let us recall “BelKazTrans Ukraine” one more time. The company took a crucial part in the coal tar story. Last year Vladimir Zelensky (the President of Ukraine) initiated a large-scale project in construction and repair of roads, because of which the use of coal tar skyrocketed. Due to the fact that Ukrainian manufacturers were not meeting the demand, belarusian factories came to the aid. They carry out about 70% of all shipments.

Thanks to government order Belarusian enterprises doubled the coal tar supply to Ukraine, including the “OilCoalTar factory” owned by Vorobey. From June last year the latter has been supplying goods directly and through “BelKazTrans Ukraine”. Moreover, the company imported the products at prices about \$50 higher than other delivery services. Although, coal tar produced by Vorobey’s plant is considered the best.

The chief editor of ukrainian “NaftoRynok” Alexander Sidorenko explains it:

“In the time of the construction boom and its increasing demand, price formation doesn’t follow any logic. Every company is eager to make a profit and get the maximum of the project”.

The massive building project keeps rolling out and belarusian factories have all chances to profit from it. Even European sanctions won’t be able to halt it”.

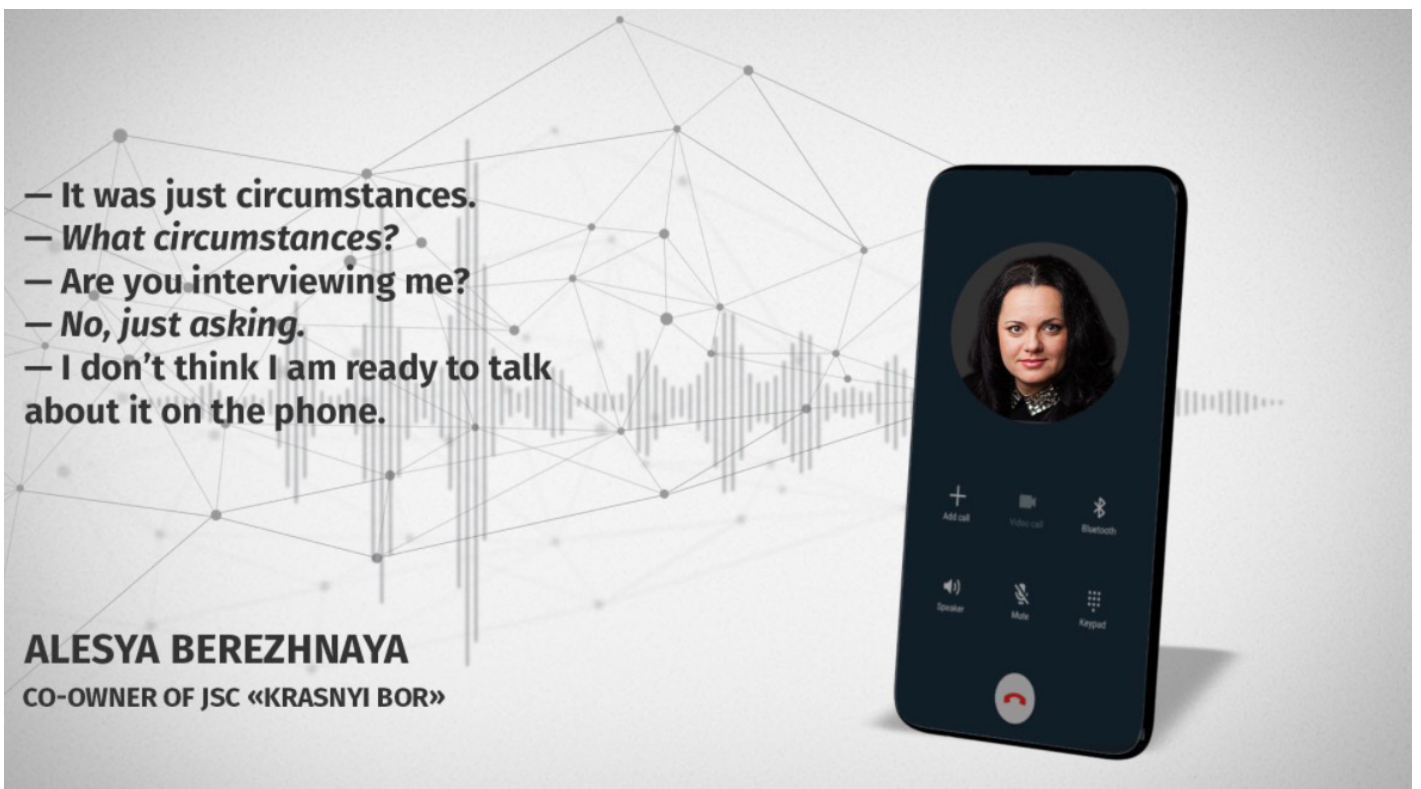
“Governmental and sort of governmental belarusian companies will do their best to keep the ball rolling. Ukraine companies stand by them on that.because we are neighbours. It’s not the same as if coal tar had to be transported from Spain or Italy by sea. I guess, some measures will be taken to circumvent the sanctions”, - believes Alexander Sidorenko.

Invisible sanction

Nikolay Vorobey takes part in another massive project carried out by belarusian company - construction of a logistics complex "Bremino-Orsha". His partners are Alexandr Zaitsev and Alexey Oleksin.



Lukashenko actually founded a tax offshore at the border with Russia in order to build a logistics hub. Thus, Vorobey, being tightly connected with authorities, is the only businessman who got under personal EU sanctions. But he found his way around - he turned over his assets to his own managers.



“He gave in his underlying asset “Krasnyi Bor”, which connected all the other assets. That said, “Interservice”, “AbsolutBank”, “New Oil Company” and “OilCoalTar Factory” all were credited on his “Krasnyi Bor” account. Thereby, changing the nominal owner of one company led to changing the nominal owner of all of his assets. Thus, he is off the hook of european sanctions”, - this opinion was shared with us by Igor Iliash, investigative journalist.

New co-owner of “Krasnyi Bor” and the director of “Interservice” Alesya Berezhnaya didn’t say much about the existing situation - “it was just circumstance” - and refused to continue any further.

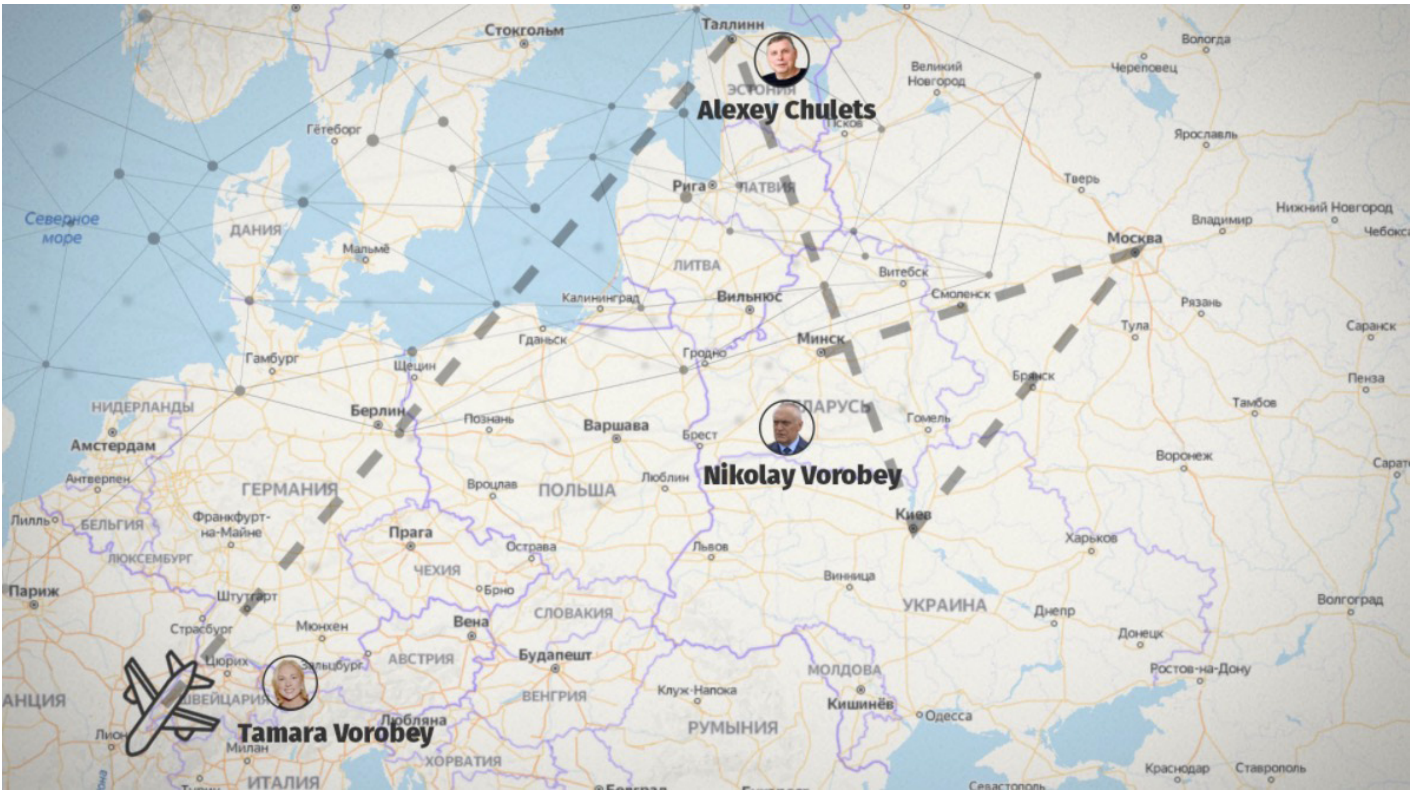
So far there is no effect of european sanctions on Vorobey’s business in sight. Right before May holidays we caught Vorobey in Minsk airport - apparently, he was coming back from Anapa by business-jet “Gulfstream G450”.



Nikolay Vorobey at Minsk Airport

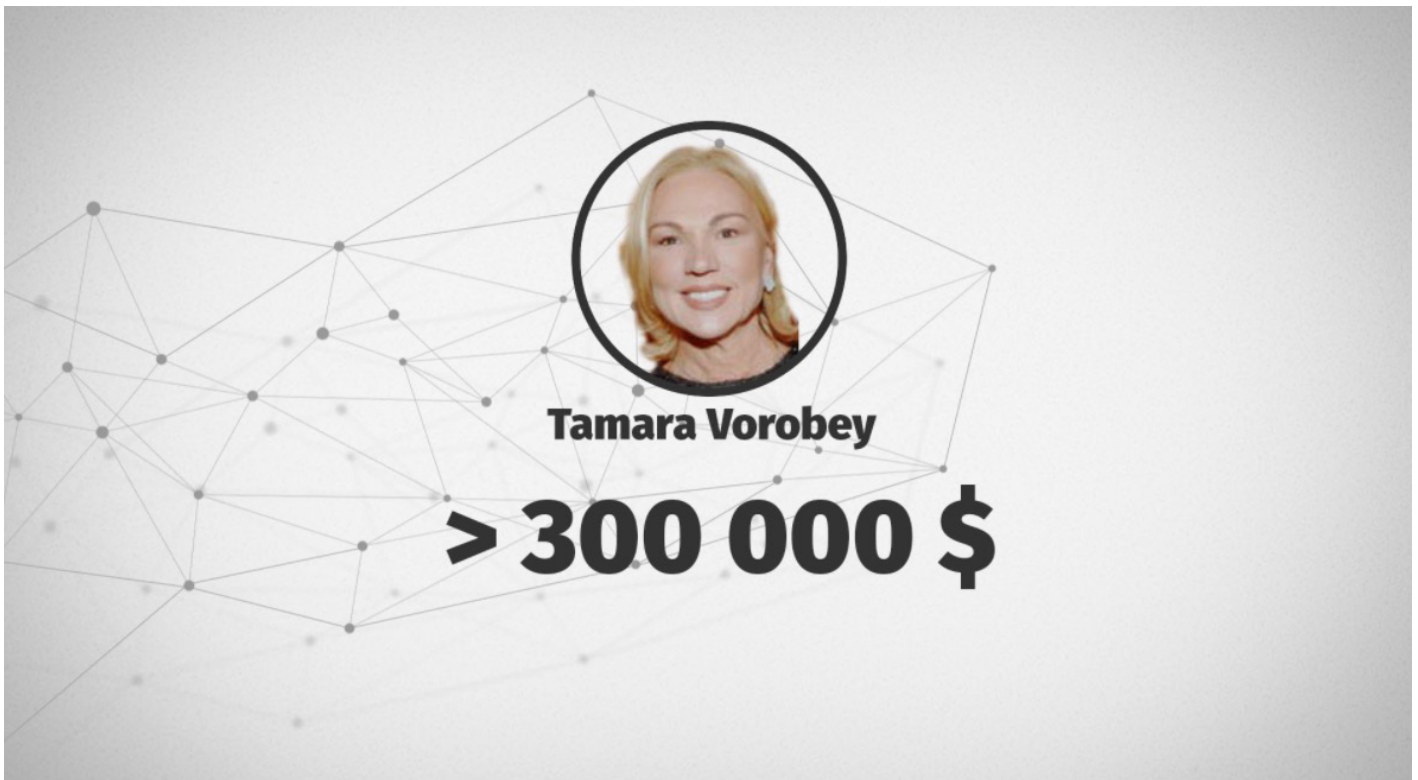
This jet has been seen quite a number of times flying between Minsk, Moscow and Kiev. Also the plane was noticed flying to Estonia, where his partner Chulets works, and Switzerland, where Vorobey’s wife lives.

In Verkhnedvinsk region there is a tourist complex “Krasnyi Bor” and just a few miles far a cottage, both belong to Vorobey. He owns three houses with a total area of 900. sq.m. In April 2019 Vorobey became the owner of two huge cottages whose total price is about \$4mln.

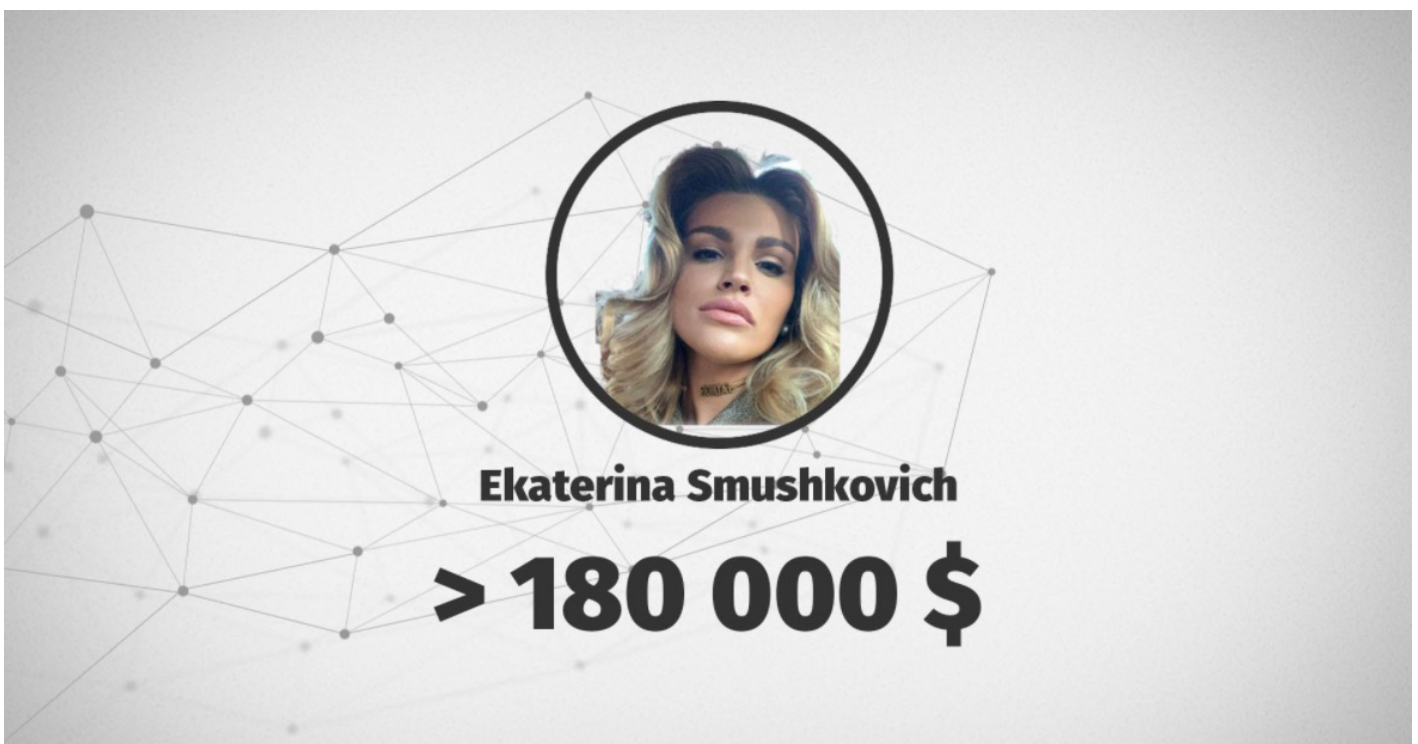


Vorobey's estate in Leshnia

The Vorobey family own properties in Novopolotsk and Minsk as well. His wife Tamara owns a 4-room apartment next to Victory Park. The flat is estimated at \$300,000.



His daughter Ekaterina Smushkovich has a 3-room flat on Masherova Avenue. This one is worth more than \$180,000. As we can see, they are doing alright.



We tried to approach Nikolay Vorobey by visiting his office, calling and texting his personal assistant and sending inquiries. But the businessman is not interested in getting in touch. However, we managed to talk to Viktor Medvedchuk about his relationships with Nikolay Vorobey. We were told that they are friends but don't share any common business interests.