

## Big names to talk global issues at YES

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Ukraine has no lack of conferences. But the annual Yalta European Strategy meeting, now in its 16th year and sixth year out of Crimea, stands out. For the fifth year, the Kyiv Post is a media partner. The event runs from Sept. 12–14 at Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv.

Often called the “Ukrainian Davos” after the World Economic Forum, billionaire oligarch Victor Pinchuk’s YES brings together political, economic, and business leaders to discuss Ukraine’s present and future. In recent years, YES has expanded its focus to global issues, adding such topics as Brexit, China, the rise of populism, and climate change.

YES is the highest profile conference in Ukraine, attended by presidents and prime ministers and moderated by top journalists such as the BBC’s Stephen Sackur and CNN’s Fareed Zakaria. This year, the speaker list includes Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, and former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón.

Besides them, it will be an opportunity for Ukraine’s new leadership to make an appearance. President Volodymyr Zelensky, Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk, Parliament Speaker Dmytro Razumkov, members of the Cabinet of Ministers, and Prosecutor General Ruslan Ryaboshapka — all are expected to deliver speeches and answer questions.

This year’s conference is titled “Happiness Now: New Approaches for a World in Crisis” and the agenda is heavy with renowned academics and writers.

One of the key speakers is Yuval Noah Harari, professor of history at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and author of the international bestsellers *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*.

Harari authorized the removal of several passages about Vladimir Putin’s lies to justify Russia’s occupation of Crimea and Donbas from the Russian edition of his book “21 Lessons for the 21st Century.” In other words, he replaced a whole chapter to avoid censorship and sell his book in Russia.

In his statement, he reportedly said that he wanted “his ideas about the dangers of dictatorships to reach as broad an audience as possible,” even those living in non-democratic regimes. But the lesson could hardly be taught if the truth about the dictatorship is concealed.

Other renowned scholars to speak at YES are Daron Acemoglu, professor of economics at MIT and co-author of *Why Nations Fail*, a book that explores why some countries are prosperous, and some are poor; Bill Gates’ favorite writer Steven Pinker, professor of psychology at Harvard

University who writes about linguistics and human progress among many topics; and Anne Applebaum, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who extensively wrote about Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's crimes, such as gulag camps and the Soviet artificial famine in Ukraine, the Holodomor.

## **Criticism**

Many have boycotted YES for being a public relations tool for an oligarch trying to whitewash his reputation and that of his father-in-law, ex-President Leonid Kuchma, which is stained by his decade-long authoritarian rule and rampant corruption, including lingering suspicions over his involvement in the 2000 murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze.

That isn't the only scandal. U.S. law firm Skadden, Arps, Meagher, & Flom claimed that Pinchuk secretly paid \$4 million to them for a 2012 report justifying ex-president Viktor Yanukovich's political persecution of his rival, ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who spent more than two years in prison. The billionaire denied it.

Pinchuk, who positions himself as pro-Western, did not want to be seen as a sponsor of Kremlin-backed Yanukovich's plan to convince European partners that Ukraine was still on the European path and the trial of Tymoshenko complied with Western standards.

On Sept. 12, Daria Kaleniuk, head of the Anti-Corruption Action Center, wrote on Twitter that she will not attend YES. She cited the Tymoshenko report as one of the reasons.

"I don't want to legitimize oligarch Victor Pinchuk as I don't believe in 'good oligarchs,'" she wrote.

After initially boycotting YES, the Kyiv Post became a media partner in 2014, arguing that the event is newsworthy and important.

"We are aware of the controversies and allegations involving Pinchuk and Kuchma, and have covered them extensively," Kyiv Post chief editor Brian Bonner said. "At the same time, the conference brings some of the biggest international players together. It would be a mistake to boycott such a newsworthy event. Pinchuk told us he wanted a truly editorially independent media partner, and we certainly have been – sometimes covering the event in ways that the organizers and some of the participants dislike."

The actual relevance of YES has also come under question — much like Davos, which has been called useless and a luxury party for political and business elites, who talk about fighting inequality or global warming while flying on private jets to the posh Swiss ski resort where the forum takes place.

YES markets itself as a platform, where "world-leading decision-makers, opinion-leaders, business people and thinkers will look at a changing Ukraine and world and discuss ways forward."

But in many ways, the conference is a just a feel-good talk shop.

Year after year, YES brings retired diplomats and politicians. Regular fixtures include former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, Cato Institute senior fellow Andrey Illarionov, ex-Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski, ex-Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt and ex-President of the European Parliament Pat Cox.