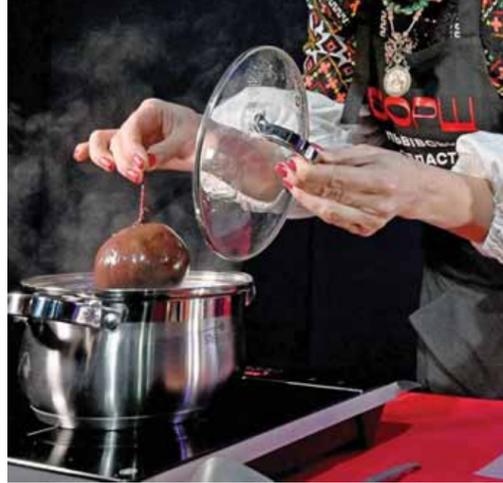


## Lifestyle | Feature



Olena Shcherban, Ukrainian ethnologist and historian, who studies borscht and has 365 of its unique recipes from all over Ukraine in her private collection, wearing Ukraine's traditional clothes and headdress cooks borscht in clay pots in the wood stove in the village of Opishnya in Poltava region. - AFP photos



Participant cooks borscht in Kiev, during an event to promote UNESCO bid to recognize the traditional beetroot and cabbage dish as part of Ukraine's historical heritage.

## BEET THIS: UKRAINE WINS FIGHT TO PROTECT BORSHCH SOUP

The UN's cultural agency on Friday inscribed the culture surrounding beetroot soup known as borscht in Ukraine on its list of endangered cultural heritage, a recognition sought urgently by Kyiv after its invasion by neighboring Russia. Ukraine prizes borscht, a nourishing soup with beetroot as its base, as a national dish even though it is also widely enjoyed in Russia, other ex-Soviet countries and Poland. The Ukrainian culture of borscht cooking "was today inscribed on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding," by a UNESCO committee, it said.

The decision was approved after a fast-track process prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the "negative impact on this tradition" caused by the war, the agency said. "People are unable not only to cook or grow local vegetables for borscht, but also to come together" to eat it, "which undermines the social and cultural well-being of communities," it said, using one of several alternative spellings for the soup.

Kyiv hailed the move as a much-needed



An illustration photo shows plate of beetroot borscht soup with sour cream in Moscow.

ed victory on the cultural front after four months of Russian bombardments. For the first time in history, the nomination jumped the queue and was considered in an expedited fashion given "the military aggression against Ukraine in real time and the real threat to the cultural object," Deputy Foreign Minister Emine Dzeppar said on Twitter, adding: "Ukrainian Borscht derussified!"

Ievgen Klopotenko, a well-known Ukrainian cook, said the UNESCO deci-

sion underscored a wider recognition of Ukraine's gastronomical heritage. "We had hundreds of pages of proof that borscht cooking culture is actually Ukrainian, and the whole engine of Russian propaganda was against us," he said on Facebook. "Victory in the borscht war is ours," Ukraine's Culture Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko said on Telegram, adding that Ukraine "will win both in the war of borscht and in this war."

### 'Fabric of society'

Adding a landmark site or traditional activity to the UNESCO list aims to mobilize attention to ensure it is preserved against risks that would jeopardize its existence. The committee said the war had "threatened the viability" of Ukraine's borscht culture in Ukraine. "Whether as part of a wedding meal, the focus of food-related competitions or as a driver of tourism, borscht is considered part of the fabric of Ukrainian society, cultural heritage, identity and tradition," it noted.

But Moscow slammed the decision, with foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accusing Kyiv of trying to

appropriate the soup for "one people... one nationality... This is xenophobia," she said. She later said on Telegram: "To give the world a culinary example of 'modern Kyiv nationalism,' I will cite a fact: hummus and pilaf are recognized as national dishes of several nations." "Borscht has no nationality! Just like bread, potatoes, cabbage - Is it national? What nationality can it have!" a 60-year-pensioner in Moscow who gave her name as Tatyana told AFP.

But Alexey Gorbunov, a 49-year-old decorator in Moscow, was more sympathetic. "Certainly, it is part of both Russian and Ukrainian legacies, but I think it's an explicit symbol of Ukraine which I directly associate with Ukraine, especially the one with pampushka (savory buns) and garlic," he said. UNESCO insisted that Ukrainian borscht was a version of a dish popular elsewhere. Nonetheless, "Ukrainian borscht - the national version of borscht consumed in several countries of the region - is an integral part of Ukrainian family and community life." — AFP

## Metaverse years from being global phenomenon: Pioneer

Big brands are rushing to the metaverse but the path to profit is still unclear and mass adoption may be years away, one of the sector's biggest players, Sebastien Borget, told AFP in an interview. Borget is co-founder of The Sandbox, a platform that began life as a game for mobile phones and PCs but is transforming itself into a virtual world where anyone can buy land in the form of digital tokens.

Fashion brands like Gucci and Adidas, financial firms Axa and HSBC, and Warner Music are among those who have already chosen to set up shop in The Sandbox. "Above all, it is a place for creativity and experience," said Frenchman Borget, distancing himself from the idea that it is simply a commercial venture.

"Brands don't go there to monetise, we don't know how to do that." Enthusiasts are convinced that internet users in the near future will shop, mingle with friends or go to concerts in platforms like The Sandbox or its main competitor Decentraland. Users will strap on virtual reality headsets, buy and sell in cryptocurrencies and have all their transactions stored on the blockchain - a kind of digital ledger. At least that is the theory.



French Co-Founder and COO of The Sandbox, decentralized gaming virtual world, Sebastien Borget takes part in the Viva Technology (Vivatech) show in Paris. — AFP

### Digital owners

The Sandbox is still largely a quest game where players hop through landscapes illustrated in block graphics, collecting treasures and vanquishing enemies. Players are also encouraged to build their own worlds and invent games. The metaverse version - where players largely do the same thing but can earn cryptocurrency rewards and buy extra kit for their avatars - has only opened to the public for special events.

Some 350,000 people visited during its last opening in March, said Borget, far short of his aim to attract "hundreds of millions". "We hope to achieve this within five to 10 years," he said. But there is still plenty of public scepticism about the metaverse and the wider web3 phenomenon - an idea for a blockchain-based internet centred on individuals rather than big social media platforms. Cryptocurrency trading underpins the commercial side of web3, but the main coins are wildly unstable and transactions can suck up a huge amount of energy.

The crypto ecosystem is largely unregulated, has gaping security flaws and little in the way of insurance, leaving users open to fraud and scams. But Borget is confident that the offer of a space for individuals to socialise, trade, play - and crucially own their digital footprint - will win out. "For the first time, users have ownership of their digital content," he said. "The avatar, the wearables, the equipment, the land, the houses... everything belongs to them. They can dispose of it as they want."

### Early adopters

Despite his focus on the social and creative aspects, The Sandbox has a clear commercial motive. It takes five percent commissions on all transactions as well as pocketing profit from the sale of virtual land. Its revenue was \$200 million last year. Plenty of major companies have jumped in, Borget highlighting that The Sandbox has only 166,464 plots of virtual land on offer.

"This map has a finite number of plots, which is not the case for all decentralized virtual worlds," said Borget. "We have sold 70 percent of them so far." The firm's sales of virtual land topped \$500 million last year and Borget claimed his metaverse had 64 percent market share. But Borget said brands were still searching for the best way to develop their virtual shops and offices. "Brands were slow to embrace the web," he said. "With web3 they are trying to get in a little earlier so as not to repeat their past mistakes." — AFP



Gogol Centre actors and personnel stand on stage after a performance in Moscow.

## Rebel Moscow theatre shuts doors after final show

The Gogol Centre theatre, one of the last bastions of artistic freedom in Vladimir Putin's Russia, shut its doors Thursday night with a defiant final show called "I Don't Take Part In War". The emotional play protesting against the Kremlin's military intervention in Ukraine marked a dramatic end of an era for the Russian capital's ever-shrinking opposition and intelligentsia circles.

Previously run by rebel director Kirill Serebrennikov, who left Russia after criticizing Moscow's offensive in Ukraine, the Gogol Centre staged daring plays for a

decade, often testing increasingly strict laws and Moscow's sharp conservative turn. Thursday's performance had some of the audience in tears when actors recited poems by Soviet poet and soldier Yuri Levitansky, a Soviet poet and soldier who was born in what is now Ukraine.

The play's name was taken from one of Levitansky's emblematic verses: "I don't take part in war, it takes part in me." As the show ended, the theatre's outgoing artistic director, Alexei Agranovich announced: "The Gogol Centre is closed. Forever." This week the Moscow authorities announced a change of leadership at a number of the capital's top theatres. They include the Gogol Centre, which will now function under new management and its old name - the Nikolai Gogol Drama Theatre.

Serebrennikov, who transformed the theatre company into a national cultural beacon, accused the authorities of "murdering" the Gogol Centre. On Thursday,

he addressed the audience via video link from Avignon in southeastern France. "The Gogol Centre is an idea, the idea of freedom. Freedom is not dead. Freedom lives on as long as we live," he said. Another prominent Moscow theatre, the Sovremennik, will also have a change of management, authorities said.

These changes are seen as part of an increasing crackdown on any dissent since President Putin sent troops into Ukraine. Before the play, some spectators lay roses against the theatre's white walls. "They are closing everything, blocking everything," Daria Kozhevnikova, a 36-year-old teacher who came to see the play, told AFP. She paused, before smiling uneasily: "Soon we will all be shackled together by one chain." Her voice trembled and she appeared on the verge of tears. "It was a place where I felt good."

### 'Symbol of freedom'

"The Gogol Centre is a place of free-

dom," said 39-year-old marketing specialist Aliya Talibova, who also came to see the play. "Now they are taking it away from us." Actor Ilya Vinogorsky, 22, said the closure of the theatre in its current iteration was "very painful". "This should not be happening. Especially in the 21st century, when we claim to be a civilized society and state."

Serebrennikov was artistic director of the Gogol Centre between 2012 and 2021. The 52-year-old was caught up in a high-profile fraud case that his supporters say was punishment for challenging the Russian authorities. He was forced to leave his post in February 2021. In his address, Serebrennikov vowed that despite the closure in Moscow, the theatre's mission would live on. "There was this building. There will be another," he said. "I hope some day the war will end and the beautiful Russia of the future will emerge." — AFP



Gogol Centre actors and personnel stand on stage after a performance in Moscow.



A spectator poses with a backdrop as he waits for performance in the Gogol Centre in Moscow. — AFP photos