Dear Mr. Gonzalez,

We write to you as B4Ukraine, a coalition of Ukrainian and international civil society organizations working to curtail the financial resources enabling the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the spirit of respect for the fundamental rights of all people, the rules-based international order, and a prosperous global economy, we expect companies to demonstrate public support for the people, democracy, and territorial integrity of Ukraine, opposition to Russia’s war of aggression, and alignment with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

We request an urgent dialogue regarding potential inconsistencies between AbbVie’s obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the company’s ongoing business operations and relationships in Russia that may contribute to, or be linked with, human rights harms.

It has been over one year since Russia invaded Ukraine and the devastating impacts continue to shock the global conscience and shake the global economy. Russia is violating international humanitarian law (IHL), including war crimes and crimes against humanity, through attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure (e.g., mass executions, sexual violence, torture, forcible transfer of civilians). More than 22,000 Ukrainians have been killed and injured and millions more have been forced to flee their homes, creating one of the largest humanitarian and refugee crises of modern times. In recognition of the severity of abuses, in March 2023 the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin to answer war crimes charges for an alleged scheme to deport Ukrainian children to Russia.\(^1\)

Moreover, as outlined below, recent developments in Russia point to an expanding universe of financial, legal, and reputational risks facing remaining companies.

On September 21, President Vladimir Putin escalated the war by announcing a “partial mobilisation” of the Russian population. The accompanying legislation (Article 9 of Federal Law No. 31-FZ) mandates all organisations, including the more than 1,500 international companies that are currently operating on a full or limited scale in Russia, to conduct military registration of the staff if

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at least one of the employees is eligible for military service. They must also assist with delivering the military summons to their employees, ensure the delivery of equipment to assembly points or military units, and provide information, buildings, communications, land plots, transport, and other material means of support to the war effort.

A new decree issued by President Putin on March 3, 2023, enables the Russian government to suspend shareholders' rights and implement external management in companies that don't fulfil state defence contracts under conditions of martial law. By specifying the process of appointing Russian government representatives to manage businesses that fail to meet state orders, the latest Decree effectively creates a scenario of "partial nationalization."

With new legislation introducing partial mobilisation, nationalisation, and potentially martial law in Russia, it is highly likely that corporations will be unable to prevent or mitigate negative human rights impacts; an obligation imposed on companies by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. As such, continuing to conduct business in Russia entails significant legal risks for companies, including potential civil and criminal liability under comprehensive sanctions regimes and recent international jurisprudence holding corporations and their officers responsible for human rights abuses abroad. By remaining in Russia, companies face the rising risk of criminal liability for complicity in international crimes, which can be prosecuted by domestic courts outside

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Russia under the doctrine of "universal jurisdiction." Companies may also be exposed to financially material risks through operational restrictions, such as limitations of future government contracts.⁵

Firms which continue to trade with Russia also face high levels of risk attached to financial transactions. On 24 February 2023, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) suspended Russia's membership as a result of the war, calling on all actors in the international financial system to exercise extreme caution in all dealings with Russia.⁷ In practice, the decision means that all international banks will scrutinise all Russian payments, making financial transactions more expensive, lengthy, with no guarantee that the transaction will occur at all.⁸ Although FATF has not yet blacklisted Russia, it highlighted the consensus among its 36 member countries that "the Russian federation's actions represent a gross violation of the commitment to international cooperation upon which FATF Members have agreed to implement and support the FATF Standards."⁹ Previous practice shows that noncooperative behaviour is one of the reasons for FATF blacklisting. As a result, companies should examine and mitigate the high levels of risk attached to financial transactions with Russia and based on that risk, companies should reconsider all ongoing business operations related to Russia.

Additionally, the Ukrainian government’s National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) has created a list of “foreign companies that, despite the international recognition of Russia as the aggressor state and the introduced sanctions restrictions, continue to cooperate with it.”¹⁰ These companies are recognised as “international sponsors of war” by the Ukrainian state. The listed entities will be included into the World-Check database to protect the global financial sector from Russian sponsors of war. Since banks and insurance companies use World-check to assess risks, companies on the list will be limited in freely accessing personal and corporate finances. So far there are 20 companies on the list, but the NACP notes that it will be expanded with “international companies that provide the public and private sector with goods and services of critical purpose, as well as [those that] contribute to the Russian budget.”¹¹

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⁹ FATF (n 7).


In response to this unprovoked and unjustified war, many companies have already left Russia. According to the Kyiv School of Economics Institute’s #LeaveRussia company tracker, AbbVie has stopped some of its operations, while continuing others.

In March 2022, AbbVie announced that it is suspending some of its Russian operations, including those related to aesthetics products, halting new clinical studies, as well as enrolment in ongoing studies in Ukraine and Russia. AbbVie also confirmed that it will donate any profits from Russia to humanitarian relief in Ukraine. However, the company also announced that they will continue providing “essential and life-saving medicines.”

While we understand that AbbVie claims that its reason for continuing operations in the country is providing essential goods, the ‘essentiality argument’ is under increasing scrutiny. For example, Professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld of Yale University challenges these explanations by stating that the reasons are “misguided at best, cynical in the medium case, and outright deplorably misleading and deceptive.” Sonnenfeld goes on to state:

“Russians are put in a tragic position of unearned suffering. If we continue to make life palatable for them, then we are continuing to support the regime […] These drug companies will be seen as complicit with the most vicious operation on the planet. Instead of protecting life, they are going to be seen as destroying life. The goal here is to show that Putin is not in control of all sectors of the economy.”

We are writing now to seek clarification on several points regarding AbbVie’s policy on essential goods, as follows:

Can AbbVie provide its definition and list of goods it considers essential in light of the particular circumstances of this conflict?
Has AbbVie considered whether its goods can be replaced with local substitutes?
Has AbbVie considered all the circumstances and complexities of the war in Ukraine in determining to continue providing these goods within Russia?

These activities in Russia risk enabling and financing Russia’s violations of IHL and human rights law during the ongoing invasion and occupation of Ukraine.

We seek to understand the status of AbbVie’s exposure to Russia and how AbbVie has conducted and continues to conduct heightened human rights due diligence, and how the findings of such a process has resulted in these continued business activities and relationships. As noted by the UNGPs:

...the more severe the abuse, the more quickly the enterprise will need to see change before it takes a decision on whether it should end the relationship. In any case, for as long as the abuse continues and the enterprise remains in the relationship, it should be able to

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12 The UN General Assembly condemned Russia’s “aggression against Ukraine” and demanded that Moscow “unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.”
14 Ibid.
demonstrate its own ongoing efforts to mitigate the impact and be prepared to accept any consequences – reputational, financial or legal – of the continuing connection.

In consideration of the above points and B4Ukraine’s Declaration, we request an urgent dialogue with AbbVie’s relevant senior management and staff to discuss the company’s ongoing activities and relationships in Russia, associated risks to the people of Ukraine and the company, and potential steps to prevent/mitigate these risks. Please contact the B4Ukraine Coalition at contact@b4ukraine.org to schedule a call. We kindly ask for your response by 5:00pm CET, April 19th, 2023.

Sincerely,

The B4Ukraine Coalition