

LOBBYING FOR AID AND WEAPONS

# Commuting between the Netherlands and Ukraine

**Putin must be stopped at all costs. That is the message that Ukrainian farmer Kees Huizinga and his wife Emmeke Vierhout, both Wageningen alumni, have been communicating tirelessly in the media since March. ‘Many countries in the Middle East and Africa aren’t getting grain anymore; that will lead to famine and new influxes of refugees.’**

TEXT RENÉ DIDDE PHOTO GENYA SAVILOV / ANP



**H**is arable farm is doing well, in agricultural terms. The crops have been sown, planted out on time, and harvested, and no bombs have fallen on the fields. But that is as far as it goes. The grain silos are full and exports are virtually at a standstill. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has well and truly turned the lives of Kees Huizinga and Emmeke Vierhout upside down since the end of February. Huizinga has been running an arable farm for nearly 20 years in Kischenzi, a village in the middle of nowhere, 200 kilometres south of Kyiv. It is a huge farm of 15,000 hectares, ‘You’ve got to picture an area



about one third of the size of the north-east polder,' says Huizinga, an Agricultural Engineering alumnus (2002). He grows grain for export and sugar beet and vegetables for regional consumption. He also keeps 2000 dairy cows and 400 pigs. The milk and meat are processed and sold regionally, while the grain used to be shipped to Africa and the Middle East via Odessa. On 24 February, straight after the invasion, Emmeke, a Tropical Land Use alumna (2001), left with their two daughters aged 11 and 12 and drove to the Netherlands via Romania. 'Using an app, I could find out where the ammunition and weapons depots

were, and which places the Russians were firing missiles at, so Emmeke could drive around them,' says Huizinga. He stayed behind to manage his 350-strong workforce, to reassure them and to keep the farm going as well as he could. He joined his family for a month from mid-March. Since then, he has been commuting back and forth regularly. 'I was asked by the Ukrainian farmers' network to talk to politicians in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK to garner more support,' says Huizinga. 'Seeking humanitarian support and asylum for people from Ukraine, as well as lobbying for weapons.' Since then, the couple have

been frequent guests on current affairs programmes and TV talk shows.

### FAMINE

They arrived in Emmen at the end of June, where they had kept a house throughout their time in Ukraine. 'But our house had been under renovation for some time,' says Vierhout. 'I was on Jinek's talk show at the beginning of March and talked about the fact that we had no house at that point. A viewer got in touch and offered us the house of his deceased parents, free of charge, for six months. That was great.' Four months on, the panic of late February >

**‘I see so many opportunities for Ukraine. But a lot of money goes to the bank and the bureaucracy’**



**KEES HUIZINGA (47)**

Arable farmer on 15,000 hectares in Kichenzi, Ukraine  
**Wageningen degree:**  
 Agricultural Engineering, 2002

has given way to relief and anger. Relief because Kyiv has not been taken, there have been no casualties in their immediate vicinity, and the fighting is mainly concentrated in the v. Anger because Putin invaded Ukraine with the aim of colonizing the country. ‘He is aiming for a new tsarist empire, which of course has been on the cards since the annexation of Crimea in 2014,’ says Emmeke. ‘Putin is now creating a world food crisis and helping to destroy Ukrainian agriculture,’ Kees argues. ‘Many countries in the Middle East and Africa are no longer getting any grain, because Russia itself is also sitting on a huge mountain of grain. That will lead to famine, starting in the refugee camps. In Lebanon, for example, where there are 1.5 million Syrians, and in Egypt and Libya as well. Those people will have no food and will flee again.’

year,’ says Huizinga. ‘Through the rowing network, goods were stored in Argo’s boat-house and taken to Bennekom for transport to Ukraine. I also have contacts from my student house H6.’ They both see Wageningen alumni as committed and concerned about the state of the world, but down-to-earth at the same time. Huizinga: ‘Wageningen folk care passionately about both their scientific field and people, and money is not their main motive.’

**MOPEDS AND CARBIDE**

Huizinga and Vierhout met each other at the bar at student society Ceres. Doing a degree at Wageningen was a fairly obvious choice for both of them. Kees Huizinga’s grandfather was a farmer in Groningen, and his uncle studied in Wageningen. ‘My father is a GP in the Groningen countryside and I always worked for a farmer, tinkering with mopeds and carbide cans’. Emmeke Vierhout is the daughter of two doctors who worked in Uganda in the 1970s. ‘It is a miracle that I was born in the Netherlands,’ she says. ‘Three of my uncles studied in Wageningen and when I saw all the pictures of tropical countries on an information day, I knew that I wanted to study here and work in a hot country far away.’

Ukraine was not on her wish list, but Kees, meanwhile, had been fascinated by the large-scale opportunities in Eastern European countries ever since he was a student. ‘Just several kilometres of oil seed rape stretching as far as the eye can see, beautiful. That is an efficient way of working,’ says Huizinga. It sounds like Groningen province scaled up. ‘Yes, that sums it up very well.’ He started with 1000 hectares leasehold and grew to 15,000 hectares of very fertile ‘black

**AID ORGANIZATION**

That is what we can expect in the autumn. Meanwhile, after four months of war, Ukraine is running out of fuel so yesterday Huizinga and Vierhout were loading 150 second-hand bicycles into a truck to provide a form of local transport. Since early March, the couple from Wageningen and their aid organization The Leeuw Kyiv Foundation have driven at least 100 trucks with a total of three million euros’ worth of aid to Ukraine. ‘The money is nearly gone now.’ They have been amazed by all the help and support, especially from their university town, Wageningen. ‘There is incredible commitment, including from people we never see these days. A lot of alumni have done well for themselves and donate generously,’ says Vierhout. ‘I was a fanatical rower with Argo and I was club chair for a



**EMMEKE VIERHOUT (44)**

Ex-journalist and since the war emergency aid worker for Ukraine. Currently studying:  
 Master’s degree in Philosophy,  
 University of Wales  
**Wageningen degree:**  
 Tropical Land Use, 2001



PHOTO MICHEL DRIEBERGEN

soil'. 'All the land here is leased by members of a privatized kolkhoz. Each villager has half a hectare of land to live off, and the employees of the kolkhoz received a share of about three hectares from the kolkhoz after the fall of the Soviet Union. That is the land we are now leasing.' So Huizinga has an incredible 5000 leases, which he pays to 5000 families every year.

Because of the efficient production conditions, he works his land with only 13 tractors. 'A Dutch farmer can cultivate 150 hectares with four tractors. For my land in the Netherlands, you would need 400 tractors, 30 times more than I am using now.'

### **Have you found what you were looking for in Ukraine?**

Emmeke: 'You'll have to ask Kees, because it is his farm.' Kees: 'But you are my – er – moral compass. Yes, I have found what I wanted, but it has been a lot of bother.' Emmeke: 'You enjoy that too, though.' Kees: 'My business has grown quickly, and yet things generally go so slowly. I see so much potential for this country. I could create so many jobs and so much added value by processing the milk, for example, and that would contribute to sustainability too. With

one hectare of solar panels I can produce electricity and therefore hydrogen to enable tractors to work 1000 hectares without emissions and noise. But a lot of money goes to the bank and the bureaucracy.'

Emmeke: 'Unlike in the Netherlands, there is plenty of space in Ukraine. But I shall nevertheless be staying in the Netherlands for the time being, and soon in our renovated house. Our daughters will go to secondary school here in Emmen. We had already decided on that before the war broke out. In Ukraine they would have had to go to Kyiv, 200 kilometres away. I can finish my philosophy degree in peace here in Emmen, unlike in Ukraine. After that I'll see; I don't look far ahead. At the moment I am looking for funding for 10,000 water filters for Ukraine. The filters are being supplied by Nazava, a company owned by two Wageningen alumni. The first thousand filters are already on the way. I'll be coming to talk about this project at the Alumni Day in Wageningen on 8 October.'

Kees: 'There are so many interesting things going on in the world, and so many opportunities. Congo could feed the whole of Africa. In Uganda, where Emmeke's parents lived for a long time, they have three har-

vests a year, but their maize varieties are very outdated. I think it would be great to work on improving that.' Emmeke: 'Oh, I'd happily go along to Uganda, but I'd prefer to go to South America.'

### **Are there classes you took in Wageningen that are still of use to you now?**

Kees: 'The big one for me was "Introducing Opti", a course about optimizing technology. It's maths, really, but philosophy as well. Because it boils down to the fact that finding an ideal solution takes longer than implementing suboptimal solutions, which turns it into a suboptimal solution too.' Emmeke: 'I agree. Not quite perfect is cool. I learned from Wageningen that reality is always more complicated and subtle than the textbooks tell you. Sometimes it can almost drive you to despair. With our The Leeuw Kyiv foundation, we collect a lot of aid, but you have to be careful not to destroy local initiatives with it.' ■

Kees and Emmeke can be followed on [www.deleeuwkyiv.nl](http://www.deleeuwkyiv.nl), via Twitter @A Dutch farmer in Ukraine. Kees vlogs every week on the website of the agricultural magazine Nieuwe Oogst.