3 Sketches from the Capital

3.1 Castle Hill

It is good to get high, so we climb Zamkova Hora (Castle Hill), a high promontory in the center of Kyiv, to reflect on a city rich with history and promise, and on the predicaments of today. The hill is also known as “Lysa Hora,” (“Bald Mountain”). From there we gain a panorama of the city and various places that we will discuss in the pages ahead, as well as have a close-up look at the hill itself and its peculiarities. An entire book can be written about this place. Indeed, the hill has inspired many: Nikolai Gogol (1819-1898) used Castle Hill as the setting for his haunting short story “The Eve of Ivana Kupala” (1830); which in turn was the inspiration for the classic symphonic poem called “Night on Bald Mountain” (1867) by Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881); which in turn was presented in a new arrangement in 1886 by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) as a “fantasy for the orchestra” called “Night on Bare Mountain”; which in turn was incorporated by Walt Disney (1901-1966) as a scene in his popular animation film Fantasia (1940). Nowadays, the Rimsky-Korsakov rendition of the original piece by Mussorgsky is heard widely as “Halloween music.”

The panorama is indeed a representation of Kyiv. We are on the city’s Right Bank, beside the hills where the walled city of Prince Volodymyr the Great stood and where his son Yaroslav the Wise enlarged Kyiv and built additional walls of his own. Those ramparts are gone, but we can still imagine their courses along the ridges that we see across the deep ravines 100 to 200 yards (91 to 183 meters) away in the directions of Kyiv’s historic core. We also see the domes of churches and high bell towers beyond, some dating from the city’s early years and others the recent work of Kyiv’s postsocialist “rebuilding of religion.” The distinctive green-and-gold domes of St. Andrew’s Church are the closest. These various churches, however, do not rise alone and are being increasingly crowded by the high-rise office buildings and apartments of New Kyiv. Some of them, in turn, are capped with domelike shapes of their own – the “oligarch domes” of postsocialist urban-architectural fashion. There are also stretches of greenery. One of them, an area nearby just beside the National Museum of Ukrainian History, is called Peyzazhna Aleya (Landscape Alley) and represents an important victory by a coalition of Kyiv’s green-minded citizens against greed-minded development. In the other direction, we look down to see historic Podil at the level of river below, and we can pick out its various conflicts between
history and new construction. Across the river to the horizon are the plains of the Left Bank. This is where the forest belt of northern Ukraine came to Kyiv's door and where, especially in Soviet times, countless districts of standardized apartment blocks were constructed. In the direction of Troyeshchyna in Kyiv's northwest, this residential landscape merges with the horizon. The river itself is an imposing sight: wide, edged here with greenery or sandy beaches and there with highways, concrete, and industry. In all directions are tall buildings, many of them of an invasive type that Kyivans call “monsters.” Construction cranes signal more tall buildings to come and a large city in transition.

For a period of months recently, St. Andrew's Church was surrounded by scaffolding and construction equipment. That was because the church had been listing and was in danger of sliding down its own slope, and the city government had initiated a project to save the structure. It seems that the hill the church stands on has been made unstable because of new construction activity and tree-cutting nearby, and it can no longer carry the heavenly weight without the pilings and concrete reinforcements that needed to be installed. A cobblestone lane winds downhill along the bottom of a ravine that begins just beneath the church for more about a kilometer (0.6 of a mile) into the heart of Podil below. This is Andriyivskyi Uzviz or Andriyivskyi Spusk (St. Andrew's Descent), the funky street filled with art galleries and studios, cafés, small museums, and vendors of handicrafts and trinkets for tourists that we will look at in Chapter 6. From our hilltop perch we see the roofs of landmarks such as the Castle of Richard the Lionhearted (as it is called), and look down at the controversial destruction, construction, and reconstruction that has turned uزviz (the slope) into one of Kyiv's main battlegrounds between preservationists of history and builders of what critics call “monsters.”

Looking down from our hill in the opposite direction, between us and the undulating ridges where the walls of Kyiv once ran, is an even deeper ravine. Here, one fork that is called Honchari was once an old stream-course lane populated by potters and other artisans, while another, called Kozhumyaki, was an historic district of tanneries and leather workers. Now, the whole area has been freshly redeveloped and goes by still another historic name, Vozdvyzhenka. As described in Chapter 7, it is one of the craziest-looking urban districts that I have ever seen.

In addition to the view in various directions, there are lessons about Kyiv from Castle Hill itself. By some accounts, the promontory is linked to the very beginnings of the city and was the supposed home of Kyi himself, the person after whom the city is named. He was the city’s legendary founder
in the 6th or 7th century along with his younger brothers, Shchek and Khoriv, and his sister, Lybid. While the founding story of Kyiv is dubious, we do know that the hill was once named Kyevytysia, again after Kyi, a person who may or may not have actually existed. The hill takes its present name from two castles that stood on the heights much later, the first built by a Lithuanian ruler in the 14th century when Kyiv was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the second, a 16th-century rebuilding of the first, that came to be occupied by rulers from the Kingdom of Poland. The first castle was destroyed in 1482 by Crimean Tatars, while its reincarnation came down in 1651 in the war against the Polish nobility by Ukrainian Cossacks led by Bohdan Khmelnytskyi. There has been no castle since, but the name “Castle Hill” has survived. In the early 19th century, part of the hill was used as a cemetery for citizens of Podil, and in 1854, the hill (or part of it) was assigned to Podil’s Florivsky Monastery, which built a hilltop chapel and opened a cemetery of its own. In Soviet times, a communications tower stood on Castle Hill. Except for decrepit foundations and piles of old bricks from the chapel, and turned over and a vandalized gravestones amid underbrush, there is not much at all on the hill today. Part of it is thickly forested, hiding whatever relics there are from the 19th century from public exposure, while another part is curiously barren, alternating between grassy fields and stretches of bare ground. It is perhaps that aspect that gave Castle Hill that other of its many names, Lysa Hora (Bald Mountain).

Indeed, perhaps the most overwhelming feeling that one gets on the bald Castle Hill is that something is missing – that here, in the very center of Kyiv, in a spot surrounded by so much visible history and so much urban variety, energy, dynamism, and change, is a wild emptiness. I have been to the top dozens of times, often as the only person in sight. The first time I went, I was unprepared for the scene and was actually afraid. What if something happens to me? What if there are robbers or killers? Or packs of wild dogs? As it turned out, nothing bad ever happened because most of the time, there was simply no one there. I observed that even dogs did not roam the heights, presumably because for them, too, Castle Hill was a void. Instead, they concentrated at the lower slopes nearer the neighborhoods where they could get food. On Sundays and holidays with good weather there were other visitors: urban explorers like myself, photographers, and

Other names for Castle Hill have been Khorevytsia after Khoriv, the brother of Kyi; Kysilivka after the 17th-century Ukrainian political figure Adam Kysil; and Florivska Hora (or Frolivska Hora) after the 16th-century monastery and convent in Podil. There are other hills in Kyiv that are also “bald” and are also referred to as Bald Hill or Bald Mountain.
couples and small groups of friends who wanted to get away. Sometimes there were picnickers. But mostly, there was a palpable emptiness and quiet, the kind of stillness in which a chirping bird or a flying insect causes a disturbance. Almost two centuries ago, Nikolai Gogol may have had similar eerie feelings when he visited the hill.

One ascends Castle Hill from one of two places, one in Podil, and the other along St. Andrew's Slope, where there are stairs. In Soviet times, for a while at least, the hill was counted as parkland and was presumably appropriately maintained, but now even the stairs are decrepit. Where the landings and handrails were made of decorative cast iron or other metal, many pieces have been taken away by collectors and scrap metal thieves. On the other way up, where flat stepping stones were placed into cuts on the slope, we now have at least two decades of erosion by the elements and destruction by vandals. When it has rained, the way up or way down is nigh impossible because of slippery mud. Along both stairs and at the summit, there is trash – lots of it. Clearly, there are people who have been here in times past, but not necessarily so many, as the trash looks to have been accumulating for a long period, perhaps even for the two full decades that the Soviet Union and its trash-cleaning services have been out of business. Forays into "garbology," reveal vodka bottles, beer bottles, and more vodka bottles, as well as other drink containers, empty cigarette packages, picnic refuse, and the occasional spent condom. There are graffiti, too, although surfaces for writing are few. Nevertheless, we see the signatures of visitors who came before us on the stairways and on gravestones, and even on the trunks of some of the trees.

This is indeed a strange landscape to encounter, given that we are in the center of a large capital city of a large European country. We feel that we have slipped off the radar screen and stepped into a void. The space appears to be under no one’s control or responsibility and is left to the elements as it was before Kyiv was settled. Human visitors are few, although once there were more as the broken stairways and architectural fragments on the summit attest, but now the space is left for drunks and vandals, for lovers under blue skies, and for occasional urban adventurers. The nights of May 1 (Walpurgis Night, a Central and Northern European witches’ festival) and July 6 (the feast of Ivana Kupala [St. John the Baptist], formerly a day associated with a pagan fertility rite) seem to be different and attract party crowds around bonfires. I have also seen students shooting a film with characters dressed in costumes from the Middle Ages, a model shoot, and an excursion group with a guide speaking Russian, but on the summit I am almost always alone. Even the dogs stay away.
One last point: the dogs might know something. There are rumors that the hill is haunted, which might be one of the reasons why Kyivans choose to stay away and why this otherwise prime piece of real estate is neither a fine park nor, as yet, a development site. There are stories about headless riders on horses, flying witches, and bloodstains that won’t wash away, as well as reports that in the evenings after rains and during windy weather, one can hear the crackling sounds of a castle burning and the crashing of its timbers, pierced by the desperate cries of the dying who were trapped inside. Some think that the screams are those of the young wife and children of the last Lithuanian prince to have resided in a castle, a man named Lelkovych who is said to have locked his family inside a burning tower in 1608. It is also said that one often sees the ghost of a nun dressed in black kneeling in prayer beside the ruins of the old chapel. I have never had any of these experiences, and I even managed to sneak home a souvenir brick with the brickmaker’s logo and the date 1857 from those same ruins without having my hand slapped by a nun, whether real or apparent.

Other mystical aspects of Castle Hill can be seen by any visitor: the hill is a sacred place for believers in ancient Ukrainian pagan faiths and has amid the trees and on a specific “bald spot” at the summit ritual places of worship and sacrifice. There are places where large rocks have been arranged in symbolic geometries across the terrain, a stone altar with charred embers in the center from some sort of ritual fires, mysterious ribbons tied to tree branches, and various other signs of communion among people who are true believers that this particular hill, which they prefer to call Khorevytsya, has a sacred place in the distant history of Ukraine. I find the entire scene, from stairways to ghost stories and witches to be fascinating, and almost did not want to tell you about it to help keep it private. I have the greatly uncomfortable feeling that before long this neglected parkland on a hill will become the haunt of the rich. The monsters of Vozdvuzhenka can rise from the depths of their ravine and overtake the slopes and summit. From the top, the moneyed princes who rule today will have their showy castles with modern-day gates, and the rest of Kyiv can look up from below.

3.2 Notes from Euro 2012

We continue with a tidbit from recent news that, I think, reflects well on Kyiv and speaks to the city’s potential to be one of Europe’s leading urban centers. So much that I will report on later is negative or irregular, so a start with good news might be welcome. The story is a bit odd, but there
Kyiv, Ukraine

are others below about real people and real events in Kyiv that are odder, so something offbeat might help set a tone, too. To wit, Kyiv, it seems, will soon put up a monument to honor the thousands of football (soccer) fans from Sweden who came to the city in summer 2012 to enjoy themselves as they supported their national squad in the UEFA Euro 2012 tournament. The games were hosted jointly by Poland and Ukraine and were held in four cities in each of the two countries. The opening match was in Warsaw on June 8 and the championship match, won by Spain over Italy, was in Olympic Stadium in Kyiv on July 1. By draw, Sweden, one of the 16 European countries that had qualified for the tournament, had its games scheduled in Kyiv, so Swedish fans came to the city in large numbers and stayed the longest. Their first match was against Ukraine, which the Ukrainian squad won 2-1. Later, Sweden lost to eventual Group D winner England and then defeated the team from France, but it was eliminated in the quarterfinals.

The games worked out well in the end for both host countries, but there were many worries and controversies beforehand. In Kyiv, for instance, there were enormous cost overruns on renovations to Olympic Stadium and concerns in the period before the games that the facility might not be ready on time. There were almost certainly considerable levels of corruption in this project, as well as in other aspects related to games facilities and preparations, including the costly expansion and renovations at the city’s main airport. Moreover, there were not unfounded allegations by critics within Ukraine that only the rich and politically connected would benefit financially. Other worries were that Kyiv and the other host cities (in Ukraine they were Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Lviv) would be overrun by soccer hooligans, drunks, and sex tourists. Kyiv has unfortunately become a global-scale haven for the latter since the fall of the Soviet order (see Chapter 10), and there was every reason to believe that those who promote the sex industry in Kyiv and other games cities, and those who work in the industry on the front lines, would seize the opportunity for a huge jump in business. Outside Ukraine and Poland, there were concerns about price-gouging by taxis, hotels, airlines, and other vendors, and about the safety of foreign players and fans alike. It was said that players of African origin and other people of color would be subjected to racist taunts from the stands, and that foreign visitors to the host nations, be they of color or not, would be subjected to violent attacks by neo-Nazi skinheads. Such predictions came especially from England and were fanned by a BBC documentary (Euro 2012: Stadiums of Hate) that showed film footage of anti-Semitism and white power slogans and salutes by young toughs in both Poland and Ukraine. A well-known Scottish footballer, Ian Campbell, urged British fans to stay away from the
host countries because of the supposed dangers. Also, Western European political leaders – most notably those in France, Britain, and Germany – announced boycotts of the games in the Ukrainian host cities because of Ukraine's recent lapses in human rights and the imprisonment of opposition leader and former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on charges of corruption and malfeasance in office that are said to be selective.

This is not the place to fully assess all of what took place with Euro 2012 or to account for the distribution costs and benefits of the project. An in-depth study would be fascinating, but in Ukraine, a truly detailed study could possibly be dangerous for the researcher. Relevant data are not easy to find and asking too many questions in a setting of rampant corruption would invite serious trouble. I can say instead about the games that the worst did not happen. Tymoshenko, however, continues to be imprisoned despite attempts by European leaders to use the football tournament as leverage on the Ukrainian government; and it is almost certainly true that the Ukrainian public as a whole paid for hosting their share of the games while the largest share of profits by far went into relatively few hands. But my main point is about Swedish fans. They apparently had a great time in Kyiv, with no major negative incidents, and left with mainly good memories except perhaps for the lack of their team's success on the field. They showed their gratitude to Kyiv with “Thank you” signs that they held up at the final match, and with handshakes and personal thanks to the nearest Ukrainian locals in their last days in the city. I was thanked myself multiple times by happy Swedes, although I had nothing to do with hosting them.

During the course of the tournament, the Swedes had their own zone within the larger “Fan Zone” that had been set up for the duration along Khreshchatyk, the main street though central Kyiv. There, they drank enormous quantities of beer, sang songs, waved Swedish flags, and enjoyed the music and other entertainment that they had arranged for themselves on a “Swedish stage.” They were boisterous, had fun, and behaved themselves as much as or more than one could expect from football fans away from home. On the day of their first match, they held a loud and happy march through Kyiv and past the city’s major landmarks on the way to the stadium, all without incident. The only sour note to report from my own observations was a British stand-up comic whose performance on the Swedish stage centered on tasteless jokes about Ukrainian culture and on Ukraine as a preferred destination for inexpensive sex. Ukrainian passersby who understood English looked on silently and perhaps wondered as did I about just where this lout thought he was; we all felt relieved when some of the partying Swedes began to jeer his act.
A great many of the Swedes, at least 5,000, camped in tents in the city. “Camp Sweden” was set up with official permission in Trukhaniv Park, an area of Dnipro River beaches that was walking distance to the center of Kyiv (but up a steep incline along the bluffs). They were able to party long into the night amid the trees, and on hot days to enjoy the beach. There were initial worries that not everything would be ready in time, but soon enough fresh water, portable toilets, and trash-removal services were provided by the city of Kyiv. Also, there was police security, electricity, and access to Wi-Fi. Taxis served the park, too, to help with luggage and camping gear. Shops were set up as well, offering souvenirs, snacks, and drinks. Mostly though, the Swedes ate and drank in the city, or purchased food, beer, and vodka in the same stores in the city where Ukrainians shopped. Therefore, they avoided much of the price gouging that may have been aimed at foreign visitors. They certainly avoided high hotel prices. In fact, the presence of this camp may have contributed to a reduction in the prices that hotels had originally intended to charge during the games, as it came clear to hoteliers that the marketplace was not in a mood for high prices in multistar hotels, and many rooms remained empty. I myself wound up paying a very fair price in a fine hotel not far from Camp Sweden during that summer.

The Swedes left happy, and Kyiv was impressed with the Swedes. There are exceptions on both sides, I am sure, but in general the relationship tilts heavily toward mutual admiration. And so now, months later, we read an announcement that in gratitude to the Swedes for their graciousness and good behavior, a monument would be set up on the site of Camp Sweden. How nice is that! A monument to tourists who have come through the city! Details about the form of the proposed monument are not set yet except for the beginnings of a competition among artists for a winning design. A part of the context for understanding this plan is that Kyiv is part of a wider culture from Soviet times and even earlier that routinely builds monuments, erects historical markers and plaques, and awards certificates and elaborate medals for various categories of achievement. Another interpretation, also with merit, is that such a monument validates Ukraine’s hosting the games and puts aside any criticisms that one might have about the games such as those about the ultimate distribution of financial benefits. However, the overall lesson is that Kyiv is proud to have hosted the games successfully, sees itself as all the more “European,” is thankful to the Swedes for having been if not model visitors, then “better than expected” visitors, and is

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6 The monument to the Swedes was unveiled June 8, 2013, exactly one year after the start of Euro 2012, and it sits where they camped. It has horns like a Viking.
eager to show to doubters and critics alike that the city and Ukraine as a whole are fine places with good people. That last point is a reminder for us, too, because in the pages below we will be discussing some of the serious problems that Ukrainians and Kyivans now face.

3.3 Monumental Woes

Almost directly across the river from where the Swedes camped and high atop a bluff is another beautiful park, this one named Khreschatyi Park. It is part of a much larger complex of parks along the Dnipro, and is scenic, romantic, historic, and everything else that one could ask of a park in the urban core. It was established in the mid-19th century by Kyiv's merchant elite and has long been known for summer concerts and other cultural events, notable statues and other monuments, and ornate cast-iron fountains. There are tall chestnut trees, steep slopes and deep ravines, peaceful winding paths, and comfortable benches for young lovers, old pensioners, and everyone else alike just meters away from the bustle of Kyiv's main streets. From promontories, we see the wide river itself, its beaches, islands, and other parks, including Trukhaniv Park, the historic district of Podil below, the spectacular statue of St. Volodymyr the Great and his brightly illuminated cross on a neighboring promontory, and kilometer after kilometer of newer residential districts across the Dnipro in Kyiv's Left Bank in the distance. Views are spectacular. So, too, is the enjoyment of nature – in all four seasons. It is a place in which to love Kyiv.

The main landmark in Khreschatyi Park is the People's Friendship Arch. It is positioned at the top of the hill that rises from the foot of Khreshchatyk, the city's main street, and it is here where we find insight into the tribulations of the city after the demise of the USSR and encounter a telling example of what I call Kyiv's “monumental uncertainty.” The monument is an enormous (50 meter diameter; 164 feet) titanium rainbow arc that was constructed in the late Soviet year of 1982, and is one of the best-known and most recognizable symbols of the city. It is found on every map and in every guidebook, and it was erected to celebrate what at the time were presented as inseparable bonds between Ukraine and Russia. At night it is ablaze with rainbow colors that can be seen for quite a distance. It can be seen as well from along Khreshchatyk, as the monument rises from high above Evropeyska Ploshcha (European Square) where Khreshchatyk begins. From up close, we see that in addition to the arc there are two clusters of sculptures that complete the assemblage: tall bronze sculptures directly beneath the rainbow of two
muscular male workers, one Russian and the other Ukrainian (which is which is neither evident nor important), who together and triumphantly hold aloft a characteristically Soviet, oversized “Soviet Order of Friendship of Peoples” medallion (Figure 3.1); while off to the side are granite sculptures of Ukrainian Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytskyi and other solemn principals at the 1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav that formally bound Ukraine to Russia.

Figure 3.1  Under the People’s Friendship Arch
The monument is superb socialist-constructivist art but its message does not fit postindependence Ukraine. What to do? It could be taken down like a passé Lenin statue and replaced with something more patriotically Ukrainian, or it could stand because it is well-executed and because, even after the divorce, Ukraine and Russia can still be friends. Besides, the monument is new and it was expensive. So, for the time being, we see a mid-course solution: the rainbow and the statues stay but the bronze caption that had accompanied the two healthy comrades of socialist labor on the pediment beneath them has been removed. That action took place, I am told, very quickly after independence during a period of “No more Russia” euphoria. However, the message can still be read because every letter of every word has left a legible shadow: It still reads (first in Russian and then in Ukrainian translation below it), “In recognition of the union of Ukraine and Russia.” The drill holes for every letter are still there, too, and I wonder if the bolts and letters are in storage somewhere in case of remarriage, but I was not able to find an answer to that question. So, what we have is a little of post-Soviet Ukraine’s confused international politics in microcosm: we are separate from Russia but we are not.

Even more interesting is what has become of the space immediately around the titanium elephant. The high promontory continues to attract visitors both day and night for its great views, summer breezes, and peaceful setting just minutes from the hub of urban bustle. It also continues its twin after-dark roles as a place for young people to drink beer and for young lovers to get to know one another better. Rich kids with status-symbol cars sometimes drive to the very top for these purposes, using a service drive and the pedestrian access to get there, knowing that there is impunity against traffic violations simply because of the kinds of cars they drive. I have a photograph of a Mercedes CL55 with a telling license plate that begins with AA 7777 (the more As and 7s on a plate, the more you can be certain that the driver is well-connected) parked under the arch. Also, there is now a carnival for kids beside the uncertain monument – a thoroughly cheap-looking carnival complete with pony rides, bumper cars, and shooting galleries for useless prizes. Other new attractions are a trampoline jump, blaring US pop music (e.g., Michael Jackson), and an assortment of brightly painted mechanical contraptions that flash lights, make noise, and carry screaming passengers on two-minute rides up and down, or this way and that in looping circles and other configurations. A blue-and-yellow tent (Ukraine’s colors) for administration of this new zone is identified with the ironic name Tsentralnyi Park Kultury (Central Park of Culture). Moreover, you can now climb from the backside of the arch and walk atop the hard
heads of the signatories of the Treaty of Pereyaslav, as my adult children did when they visited me in Kyiv. No one cares; no one monitors. From there, the view of Kyiv is even better. You also get to study the stern bronze faces of the strapping Russian and Ukrainian chums up close, and can see a leaping Keanu Reeves (the American movie actor) on a poster plagiarized from the film *The Matrix* as the backdrop. Just before the Euro 2012 fans began to arrive, still another attraction was added to the array: a long ropeway along which paying passengers could descend individually in a thrill ride from high atop the viewpoint in Khreschatyi Park across the Dnipro to the sands of Trukhaniv Beach below. For daring Swedish campers, this was doubtlessly a fast way home from the city.

### 3.4 Demons at Desiatynna

Desiatynna (meaning “one-tenth”) was the name of the first great church that was built in Kyiv after Prince Volodymyr the Great had his subjects baptized into the Christian faith in 988. It was completed in 996 and stood prominently within the original walled city on a high promontory overlooking the Dnipro River. Its formal name was the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin, but it came to be known popularly as Desiatynna because its cost was covered by a one-tenth portion of Volodymyr’s wealth. Thus, in English the historic church is often referred to as the Church of the Tithes. By the end of the long (1019–1054) reign of Volodymyr’s supremely enlightened son Prince Yaroslav I, known with great respect as Yaroslav the Wise, more than 400 churches studded much enlarged Kyiv. The city was called the “New Jerusalem” because it was envisioned as both a rival to the Abrahamic holy city and as an alternative religious capital to Muslim-controlled Jerusalem.

We no longer know much for sure about the dimensions and the form of the original Desiatynna, but it was certainly built in the Byzantine architectural tradition and was the first exemplar of Kyiv’s domes. There is a cathedral in Chernihiv, a Ukrainian city to the north of Kyiv, that was built in the 1030s that is said to resemble Volodymyr’s church, but even that is not known for sure. What we do know is that after his death in 1015, Volodymyr was buried in Desiatynna alongside his wife, Anna, and that after a reburial ceremony while Volodymyr was still ruler, the church had also become the final resting place for his grandmother, the brilliant Princess Olga (Olga), the first Christian ruler of Rus (945–963).

The church is long gone. It was destroyed along with the rest of Kyiv in the Mongol invasion of 1237–1240. Hundreds of Kyivans had taken shelter in
the church during the onslaught and perished when the burning structure collapsed. In the 17th and 18th centuries there were botched attempts at reconstruction that disturbed the architectural integrity of the ruins, and now even those latter-day churches are gone. There is just bare earth at the site, beneath which are fragments of foundation, although they are more from the reconstructions than from the original church. The site was an active archeological dig until recently, but now whatever the specialists were looking at has been covered again with earth and the premises are enclosed by a high wooden fence painted green, just like the fences all over the city that surround construction sites and sites where old buildings await demolition.

Despite the fact that there is no longer anything to see there, the vacant ground is held sacred by all flavors of Orthodox and Ukrainian Catholic believers as a place of origin of their Christian faith. It is also held holy because it links them to the proud history of Kyivan Rus. However, there are differences in historical interpretation between nationalistic Ukrainians on the one hand and nationalistic Russians on the other about which nation is more directly descendant from Rus, and whether Ukrainians are truly a national population. Consequently, the Desiatynna site has enormous emotional meaning for both Ukrainians and Russians, and has occasionally been the locus of conflict between hardliners on both sides. This has held back decisions about what, if anything, should be built. The choices seem to be some combination of a church, a museum, or a prominent monument, or perhaps nothing at all except an historical marker. Instead of Solomonic compromises or civil discourse between competing interests, what we have instead at the summit of Prince Volodymyr’s hill is more of the incessant chaos and conflict that have marked Ukraine since independence. The story is ugly, pure and simple, and factions on all sides behave like demons. Let me tell you what happened at Desiatynna on Saturday, May 28, 2011, a day that I describe as one for the notebooks.

Beside the wooden fence that surrounds the site of the old church is the Ukrainian National Museum of History on one side, the city’s oldest tree, a 370-year-old linden, near the fence on another side, and the beautiful baroque St. Andrew’s Church in a third direction. Just there, Andriyivskyi Uzviz (Andrew’s Slope), the popular street for arts and crafts and tourist souvenirs, begins its winding descent to the elevation of the river below. Also just outside the fence, on the grounds between the imposing history museum and a forbidding green fence, and amid various relic stones that had been unearthed from other chapters of history on this very plateau, is a small and low-slung Orthodox church. It is about eight years old, has an
ornate iron front gate and low iron fence of its own, a lot of loud bells to ring
the faithful to services, and an attractive, modern-style Orthodox cross on
the roof. Until recently it was made of timber and resembled a log cabin, but
now it is larger and is finished with masonry (Figure 3.2). It also has great
ambitions: depending on the source, it plans either to rebuild Desiatynna,
to build a great new church on the Desiatynna site, or to build a new church
beside the Desiatynna site in a way that would preserve and celebrate the
sanctity of Desiatynna. Regardless of which path is true, the small structure
that stands now is temporary and the plan is to erect a grand new church.

The small church is the Ukrainian Orthodox parish of the Nativity of the
Blessed Virgin. It is actually a Russian Orthodox Church that answers to
Volodymyr, the Moscow-appointed Metropolitan of Kyiv and of All Ukraine,
who comes to visit regularly in his black Mercedes, and in turn to his ec-
clesiastical superior, the controversial Kirill, a man whose title is Patriarch
of Moscow and All Rus and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church. The
controversies about the Patriarch swirl because of his alleged past as a
KGB agent codenamed Mikhailov; his close relations with President Putin
of Russia, also from the KGB; his running a business importing cigarettes
into Russia by exploiting the duty-free status that was given to the church;
and his apparent wealth. In addition to expensive tastes in automobiles, we
have seen Kirill on a photo on the church website wearing a pricy Breguet brand Swiss watch. However, it has since been airbrushed out, probably because the original photo became an Internet hit. If the parishioners and their priests succeed in building a huge shrine either atop or beside the Desiatynna site, they will symbolically claim the religious and historic center of Kyiv for the capital city of Russia. Such a possibility infuriates those Ukrainians who identify with the two rival, Ukraine-based Orthodox confessions, Ukrainian Catholics, and millions of other Ukrainians with strong nationalistic, anti-colonial, and anti-Russian sentiments. Thus, when newspapers and other media reported on the morning of May 25, 2011, that trucks with construction equipment had arrived during the postmidnight hours and were admitted within the locked enclosure of the Desiatynna archeological site by Russian Orthodox priests with keys for the gates, all hell broke loose. Who gave them, a religious faction, the keys to important national property? Did they also receive authority to build? What did the archeologists know about this?

For now, these are unanswered questions in no-transparency Ukraine. Thinking nothing but the worst, by May 28 the picketing by “Moscow-phobic” Ukrainians was fast and furious. I was there that day as an observer, and I saw Ukraine depressingly deeply riven by national identity, language, and flavor of faith. There was profound hatred on all sides. Among the protestors, some of whom may have been provocateur-plants (you never know), I heard the ugliest of chanting and saw the most vile messages on picket signs (for example, that Russian Orthodox “priest-pigs” should be carved up to make sausages). Meanwhile, the lineup of priests and monks who faced the angry masses from behind a protective barricade of police at the gate of their little log church were positively disgusting with their smirks and eye-daggers on this day when they held the cards. “Their” president, Yanukovych, nominally himself a member of the Moscow church and, clearly from much evidence, a great fan of Kirill, had allegedly authorized the start of construction, and on that day the protestors could do no more than vent their frustrations.

Jerusalem, Constantinople, Ayodhya, and Kyiv, I thought, all ancient cities fraught with both domes of religion and demons of hatred. The Soviets had kept such factionalism suppressed, but when the weight of their authority lifted unexpectedly in 1991, Ukrainians became free to debate their allegiances and to behave against one another just like the country’s notoriously pugilistic parliamentarians who are discussed in the next section. The police impressed me with their professionalism. They had managed to keep the peace such that despite all the anger, by the end
of the day no one had hit anyone and no one was hurt. Months later, as I write this, the log cabin church still stands and is guarded round the clock by a hired private security service. I also see Kyiv police on the site quite often and young Russian Orthodox priests who look like boxers. I note that the holy men drive Mercedes automobiles and I always look to see what kind of watches are on their wrists. The church stopped dumping its trash behind the green fence, because protestors had made a big deal about the fact that they had found cards where the Orthodox faithful had written out their intentions for prayers by the priests (for which they had paid) among the refuse. Protestors show up from time to time and write graffiti on the fence, which is then repainted after they leave. The conflict wears on and on.

3.5  The Ukrainian Fight Club

Not surprisingly, the coming of independence was greeted with great joy by many Ukrainians as the start of a new era. For them, the old demons of communist rule and Russian cultural imperialism were dead or about to die, and there were great promises for a bright future. The break wasn’t all serendipitous, of course, as many brave citizens had been clamoring for human rights and challenged Soviet authority for decades before independence finally arrived, and some dissidents such as Alla Horska, Vasyl Stus, Oksana Meshko, Oleksa Hirnyk, and Oleksa Tykhyi had given their lives for these causes. In Ukraine, as well as in other former republics that had once been part of Moscow’s “prison of nations” or “family of nations,” depending on one’s stance about the Soviet Union, exuberant citizens toppled or otherwise dismantled the huge statues of Lenin that had stood in the centers of capital cities, removed other symbols of Soviet rule, and celebrated in the streets as the good news unfolded. It was only later that the reality began to sink in that there was work ahead to build a new order, and that there would be new demons along the way that would dash dreams of easy freedoms and a smooth ride to democracy and prosperity. In Ukraine especially, more so than in some of the other non-Russian republics (especially the Baltics), a “Wild West” ensued in which there was more disorder than anyone had imagined in the place of the order that, for better or worse, had been imposed by Soviet authority.

Now, more than 20 years later, there is still no clear recipe for Ukraine’s future nor consensus about what the post-Soviet world should be like. That is one of the main reasons for the mess. Perhaps more so than in the other former republics other than the Russian Federation itself, a free-for-all
for opportunists ensued: former communists refashioned themselves as democrats and capitalists and scrambled for political power under new constitutions and for entire industries for personal gain. They took over metallurgy, mass media, agribusiness, natural gas, chemicals, the airlines, banking, and even sports teams, among other branches of the economy that had once been the property of the state, and joined the ranks of the richest people in the world. People were killed in the scramble, including political rivals and business competitors, as well as journalists and other citizens who complained about the widespread theft of national wealth and endemic corruption. Instead of a country run by privileged members of the Communist Party, power shifted to well-connected, new-billionaire oligarchs and the politicians they supported, while true democracy and an open, civil society took a back seat. For 20 years since independence, it has been two steps forward and one step back, followed by one step forward and two steps back in Ukraine, depending who is in power or how you view that particular political party. Ukraine is still in many ways as disorganized as it was in 1991. Indeed, as we will see, under President Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych (in office since February 25, 2010) and his Party of Regions Ukraine is taking many more than two steps back. The European Union has become highly critical of this situation, and it seems that Ukraine is now further from being allowed to join rather than closer. Moreover, the country is deeply and complexly divided both geographically and ethnically/linguistically, and according to many observers, hardly functions as a single state with a common goal. Yanukovych is said to have worsened the divisions, such that the very basics of what Ukraine is and what kind of place it should be are, for better or worse, still up in the air.

Incredibly, one often hears in Ukraine that the country is run by Ukraine-haters. Even more, Ukraine’s citizens in significant proportions apparently genuinely believe that the politicians in charge actually despise the country that elected them and work instead for foreign powers! Critics of former “Orange Revolution” president Viktor Yushchenko said that about his turning of Ukraine between 2005 and early 2010 to the West and in particular the United States, where his wife is from; while critics of Yanukovych, the president who succeeded him, argue with equal conviction that he and his “kirilivska-donetska banda” (his Party of Regions gang from his hometown, Donetsk, in the east of Ukraine and his close ties to Kirill, the patriarch of the heavily political Russian Orthodox church based in Moscow) are actually working for Russia. The more billboards that Viktor II erects to tell the nation to love Ukraine, the more millions and millions of citizen-critics say that the message is a front and that under Yanukovych the nation is being
nudged back to its neighbor to the north. For example, in an action that was both symbolic and would have practical implications, the Verkhovna Rada voted early 2011 to return the country to the same time zone as Russia by abolishing the use of daylight savings time, which had been adopted in 1992 specifically to bring Ukraine one hour closer to the rhythms of Europe. Until it was reversed in response to the popular outcry, the decision put Ukraine once again on Moscow time, like it was during Soviet winters, and back two hours from the clocks of Europe. Could there be another such country on the planet where the top-most leaders, one election after the other in succession, are routinely accused of being agents of foreign powers?

The court of world opinion is also negative about today’s Ukraine. At the time of the Orange Revolution, the country was the darling of post-Soviet nations in Western eyes, with tangible prospects for democracy, an open society, and free-market prosperity, but more recently Amnesty International, Freedom House, and other international human rights bodies (e.g., Reporters without Borders, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Human Rights Committee) have all flagged Ukraine as a disturbingly regressive state. They and other independent observers sound alarms about everything from endemic corruption to dubious election processes and documented worrisome declines in Ukraine in basic freedoms and government transparency from soon after Yanukovych took office. So, too, Europe is ever more wary of Ukraine as a potential EU member, citing recent slippage in freedoms for the press, economic freedoms (164th of 183 nations as reported by the US–Ukraine Business Council), and academic freedoms and policies that would integrate the country’s higher education system with practices in other countries. There are also concerns about selective prosecutions of political opponents, most famously those against former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, whose circuslike trial for abuse of powers began in 2011 the day after Ukrainian Constitution Day (June 28) and concluded with a guilty verdict and a seven-year prison sentence that she is now serving. There were also dubious charges brought against former Interior Minister Yuryi Lutsenko, who for a time was on a hunger strike in protest of accusations against him, and against former Finance Minister Bohdan Danylyshyn, another member of Tymoshenko’s inner circle, who has been granted political asylum in the Czech Republic.

I wonder if there is another country in the world that tolerates tacky commercial advertising just outside its capitol building. Amazingly, that is the case on Capitol Hill in Kyiv, outside the Verkhovna Rada building, the building of the national parliament and formerly a seat of Soviet Ukrainian bureaucracy. The building itself is an elegant and inspiring
structure with classical columns and a large glass dome (designed by V. Zabolotny; erected in the harsh Stalinist years of 1936-1939), and one of the main national landmarks in the city. The street immediately outside the building is Vulytsya Hrushevskoho (Hrushevskyi Street), named after the famous Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevskyi (1866-1934) who was president of the short-lived 1917-1918 Ukrainian National Republic. The street was previously named Kirov Street after the prominent Bolshevik leader Sergei Kirov (1886-1934) after whom so much else was also named in the Soviet Union (Kirovograd, the Kirov Ballet, etc.), and it was once lined with red Soviet flags and communist symbols and slogans. However, in today's Kyiv it is advertisements for the products and services of capitalism that adorn the street. There are commercial billboards large and small, and banners positioned one after the other along the full length of Vulytsya Hrushevskoho that span the street overhead from one side to the other. On the summer day that I made a full photographic inventory in 2012, the advertisement closest to the capitol building of Ukraine was for a business enterprise 100 meters away that offered Thai massages, while the banner that followed advertised “Kvantova Epilatsiya” in large font between suggestive silhouettes of two curvy female figures. The words mean “Quantum Epilation,” apparently the proper name for the hair-removal salon that paid for the ad. Other text on this banner explains that the hair-removal process is new, painless, and lasts forever.

Finally, in case there is still doubt that Ukraine is a mess, we visit Ukraine’s parliament to see narodni deputati (national deputies; members of parliament) in action. It might be that they are all relaxed from massages and well-groomed in their nether regions, and it might also be that some nardeps are wonderful human beings with genuine agendas for building a strong country, but as a whole the 450 members are nothing short of being an embarrassment to the nation. For one thing, the group is highly inbred, with many father-son, uncle-nephew, husband-wife, and sibling pairings, proving that either superior talent for politics runs in gene pools or that nepotism (kumivstvo) runs rampant. Second, it seems that the Verkhovna Rada is known globally as the parliament that fights: an assemblage with too many hot-headed and immature middle-aged men who throw furniture and microphones at one another (e.g., December 16, 2010); release smoke grenades and throw eggs and tomatoes in the hallowed chambers where they meet (April 27, 2010; the date when the speaker of the parliament, Volodymyr Lytvyn, tried to preside over the assemblage from under an umbrella held by aides); and shout in the foulest of language and call each other street-language names (too many incidents
to enumerate; hardly news any more). More recently (on May 21, 2011), the vice-speaker of parliament, Adam Martynyuk of the Party of Regions, grabbed fellow nardep Oleh Lyashko, an opposition politician affiliated with the bloc headed by Tymoshenko, by the neck in a choke hold. That incident, too, is on film all over the Internet, and the world laughs at Ukraine, the name pun, and the “choke” that is Ukraine’s leadership. Lyashko has since tried to capitalize on the incident by posting billboards showing a photo of the attack and the caption “And this is how they choke Ukraine,” but in response the blogosphere laughs at the idea that he is somehow a sympathetic symbol of the nation. And then more recently still (March 20, 2013) is proof that assaulting one another is simply business as usual. On that day, 20 or more nardeps of opposing parties went after each other when Oleksandr Yefremov, the leader of the Party of Regions in parliament, spoke in Russian and members of the Ukrainian-nationalist Svoboda (Freedom) Party began to jeer him. That brawl is recorded on YouTube as well.

If only the Ukrainian Fight Club was always about issues of national importance, then we could at least say that this was democracy in action, albeit crudely. It sometimes is, as was in the case on smoke-and-eggs day on April 27, 2010, when the dispute was about the national administration’s decision to renew for 30 more years a lease by Russia for a naval base on Ukrainian territory in Sevastopol, a naval port city in Crimea. But just as often, what is at stake in the fights is not national policy but lawmakers’ personal access to the nation’s wealth. Unlike many other countries in the world where government service is an honorable calling to work for the good of the nation, in Ukraine it is seen as a position from which one can enrich himself. That is why people run for office in Ukraine and cheat in elections to win. That is also why Ukrainian government service attracts crooks. President Yanukovych himself, for example, used to steal hats from passersby he could outrun when he was a young man, and he served two jail terms before becoming a politician, one for 18 months after a 1967 conviction for theft, and the other for 3 years for assault in 1969 soon after his return from behind bars. Sadly, Ukraine is a kleptocracy and corruption is among the worst in the world, be it in national government or at local levels, including as we will see, in Kyiv. According to data for 2009, Ukraine as a whole was 146th out of 180 countries on the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the worst score in Europe except for Russia, another “Wild West” nation, with which Ukraine was tied (Timor-Leste and Zimbabwe were also 146th).
3.6 A Missing Mayor

The situation is not necessarily better at the local, municipal level. Consider the example of the city’s most recent elected mayor, Leonid (Lonya) Mykhaylovych Chernovetskiy, a man who has also been called Lonya Kosmos, i.e., “Cosmos” in English as in “Lonya the Space Cadet.” The nickname is intentionally derisive and stems from but one of many odd statements and eccentric actions that he had made while in office, this one a public announcement of a plan to fly into space with his cat. He also gained attention for recording a compact disc in 2009 of “very tragic songs” of the 1980s that he said he sings better than anyone but God, for impromptu performances at rallies and political appearances, and for unexplained attempts to auction off his own kisses. When city officials called for a medical examination of Chernovetskiy’s mental health, he responded by posing for photographs in tight swimming trunks to show that he was indeed qualified for the mayor’s job. There are rumors that he has problems with alcohol or drugs, although there is no evidence of either. However, his wife, Alina Aivazova, told an interviewer from the news magazine Segodnia (August 11, 2011) that were it not for her, “Lonya” would be an alcoholic in a gutter (“Yesli bi ne ya, Lonya bi stal alkoholikom i valjalcja v kanave”). In 2008, Chernovetskiy showed himself to be a fighter like his chums in parliament when he emerged bloodied in the face after sparring with the aforementioned Yuryi Lutsenko at a meeting of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council.

Eccentricity is not a sin, and even addiction, if true, can often be dealt with as a person continues to work. Much more damning are credible allegations that Chernovetskiy had been dishonest in office, and the undisputable fact that for nearly two years until shortly before he resigned in mid-2012 just before his term was set to end, he was absent from the job without explanation. There were only guesses about his whereabouts. Chernovetskiy was elected to the mayor’s office in 2006 as a member of a small Christian Liberal party. He won with only 32 percent of the vote in a contest with multiple candidates, and he was then reelected in a snap election in 2008 with a mere 38 percent of the vote. He was on the job, such as it were, until the middle of 2010 after which he was seen only sporadically and ever less. Then, after some weeks of unexplained absence, he turned up unexpectedly.

7 The usual way to transliterate the surname would be Chernovetskyi, but he himself uses Chernovetskiy.
on February 24, 2011, to attend a routine meeting of the city council (*miska rada*). He disappeared immediately afterwards and was AWOL until the summer of 2012, when he finally turned up and resigned. In the meantime, President Yanukovych had appointed Oleksandr Popov, the popular former mayor of the small town of Komsomolsk in Poltava oblast, to be the head of the Kyiv city administration and cover for Chernovetskiy’s absence. In the nearly year and half that he was gone, the mayor was apparently seen in Switzerland and Georgia, as well as in Tel Aviv. Although he is an active member in a fundamentalist Christian sect that some think of as a cult, he has a Jewish background and is rumored to hold dual Ukrainian and Israeli citizenship.

The best explanation for why Chernovetskiy vanished seems to be that whether high or low on the totem pole, the people of Kyiv wanted to speak with him — perhaps even to cuff him. There are many questions to ask, including about the sale during his administration of 90 historic buildings in the center of the city — mostly once-beautiful “sugar boom” mansions from the turn of the 20th century — to private buyers at a tiny fraction of their true value. There might be questions as well about the origin of €4.5 million (US$5.7 million) worth of jewels that Chernovetskiy’s daughter Khrystyna Chernovetska said were stolen from her Paris hotel room on February 15, 2010. Ironically, Chernovetskiy’s 1984 doctoral dissertation at Kharkiv Law School was about how prosecutors investigate corruption by public officials.

As a result of all these machinations, Kyiv does not have an elected mayor as it is supposed to have: there is only the presidential appointee Oleksandr Popov. He has been assigned the duties of mayor from his post of head of city administration. An election is overdue but has not been scheduled by the president because it is not certain that his candidate, Popov, would win. Kyivans are not great fans of the president or the Party of Regions, and they could well decide to cast their lot with someone else. Moreover, there is at least one, literally, very strong potential candidate who could not only win the election but also use the post of mayor as a springboard for challenging Yanukovych for the presidency because he is popular across the country. That person is Vitalyi Klitschko, PhD (a real doctorate), philanthropist (mostly schools, churches, and children’s causes), and the reigning World Boxing Council heavyweight champion. He came in second to Chernovetskiy in the 2006 election. He is already a member of parliament, where he heads the growing political party that he founded, Udar (a striking blow as in a punch). However, he has not joined in the parliamentary fisticuffs, and is not likely to do so, as he presents himself
differently from the colleagues who are thugs. 9 There are also other possible candidates for the mayoral vacancy, so Popov and Yanukovych could have a fight on their hands if there were an election. Even though the acting mayor is a man of talent and reasonably popular, at least in comparison to his presidential mentor, Kyivans seem to be increasingly impatient and have begun clamoring for an election. As I write this, there is a four-page leaflet being handed out widely in Kyiv under the banner Vlatu Kyanlam! (Power to Kyivans!) that agitates for an election. 10 It is in Ukrainian, but a recent issue (#3), features the Russian-language headline POPOV! Davay, do svidaniya! (POPOV! Let’s Go, Good-bye!). 11 The text refers to the city administrator as a puppet of Donetsk (donetska marionetka; the president’s home base) and begins as follows:

In Kyiv there is no mayor. Instead, the city is being run by the head of city administration. The difference is that a mayor is elected by the citizens of Kyiv, while the head of city administration is appointed by the president ... Kyivans need a mayor who will protect their interests and address the problems of the city. The government knows very well that Kyivans will never elect a Donetsk person [donetskoho] for this post. But the Regionnaires will do anything to ensure that today’s head of city administration Oleksandr Popov will occupy the coveted seat of mayor of Kyiv.

3.7 A Geography of the President

President Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych is a good choice for special attention because he is a raider at the top of his class and because his personal life history is so quintessentially dishonest. Born in 1950 in Yenakiyevo (now Yenakiieve), a small city near Stalino (now Donetsk) in the eastern part of the Ukrainian SSR, his story has been a trajectory from childhood poverty in the gritty coal-mining region called Donbas, to teenage years

9 Klitschko’s nickname in the ring is Dr. Ironfist. His professional boxing record is 45 wins against 2 losses that came on days of an aggravated shoulder injury, and his knockout percentage rate is an astonishing 87.23 percent, just a hair under the world heavyweight record for all time of 87.76 percent. At his mother’s request, he has never boxed against his younger brother Volodymyr, the reigning World Boxing Association heavyweight champion. Volodymyr is called Dr. Steelhammer and has a ring record of 60 wins against 3 losses. Once, in New York City, I challenged Vitalyi Klitschko to a fight but he declined.
10 It is authored by Kyiv activist Mykola Katerynchuk.
11 Popov speaks Ukrainian well. The choice of Russian for the headline is for effect.
and young adulthood as a tough street punk with richly deserved prison records for hat-raiding (stealing hats off the heads of passersby) and for assault, and eventually to the top position of political power in Ukraine in 2010. Along the way, he studied mechanical engineering and worked in the transportation sector in Donbas, and then turned to Donetsk oblast politics, first as a communist and then as an ascending star in the Party of Regions. He was appointed vice-head of Donetsk oblast administration in 1996, and then less than a year later he was made governor. His official biography claims that he was a professor on the Faculty of Automotive Transport at the Donetsk State Academy of Administration in 1999, although it seems doubtful that such a department ever existed at the institution. His biography also states that he earned a doctorate degree in Economics in 2000 from the Academy of Economic Sciences of Ukraine, although there is no record on file of the required dissertation nor records of his having fulfilled any other requirements for that credential. He misspelled the occupational title “Profesor” among a dozen mistakes on a Central Election Commission form in which he declared his candidacy for the presidency of Ukraine in 2004. He lost that run to Orange Revolution candidate Viktor Yushchenko, but then he narrowly won the post in 2010 in an election that is widely considered to have been fraudulent in his favor.

After becoming president, the tough guy from Donbas wrote a book for the apparent purpose of building Ukraine’s profile abroad and attracting foreign investment. It was put together in Russian, the language that he speaks best, but was published in English, a language he does not know. It is called *Opportunity Ukraine* (Yanukovych, 2011), and describes itself on the jacket as “a practical guide for prospective investors.” A main item of advice is that “naturally, those who come to Ukraine first will reap the most benefits.” Because Yanukovych has no grace with words in any language, this book, like books by other celebrities, was put together by ghostwriters. In this case, however, the writers may have been thieves, as reviewers immediately flagged parts of the text for egregious plagiarism. Not only was it reported that there are word-for-word passages from previously published material (i.e., from the weekly news magazine *Korrespondent*), but incredibly and crudely, also from a Russian essay-sharing website, referat.ru, that cheating college students use to buy papers for classes (Associated Press, 2011). Can anything be more embarrassing? Yet, in Ukraine, as with so many other scandals in the country, news about the plagiarism disappeared from the press just as suddenly as it appeared. People are used to malfeasance, have been acculturated to look the other way, and go about their own business instead. In the meantime, the book itself has quietly vanished from
store shelves and libraries as if it had never existed, and inquiries about its whereabouts are met with blank stares or the reply, “I don’t know.” In one bookstore where I asked just for fun, the clerk laughed uproariously at my question. The book is not available on Amazon or on eBay, but it does indeed exist (Figure 3.3). Ironically, the back cover explains that “the author is honest and sincere with his readers in offering them deep insider analysis ... and in offering his advice,” and promises that “readers will be enticed by the author’s genuine and straightforward manner, his sharing his dreams for his country, and [confusingly or inexplicably, as in ‘where did this come from and what does it mean?’] his opposition to populism” (Motyl, 2011a).12

12 I am thankful to Professor Motyl for sharing his copy of the book with me.
As president, Viktor Yanukovych is proving to be especially costly for the citizens of the country to support. He lives far beyond the means of not just the vast majority of fellow citizens, which is normal for a head of state, but also, it seems, in comparison to most European presidents and prime ministers, as well as most leaders elsewhere around the world. The latter comparison is especially out of whack given Ukraine’s relative poverty. If there are spending similarities with leaders in other countries, then they would probably be with unfavorable people in poverty-bound countries where high-level corruption is the rule. Specific details are, of course, hard to come by, but the muckraking Internet magazine *Ukrayinska Pravda* (Ukrainian Truth), the news source that was established by murder victim Heorhiy Gongadze (see Chapter 4), reported that going into his second year in office Yanukovych has been by far the most expensive of Ukraine’s presidents to maintain, with budgets for housing, transportation, upkeep of his properties, and presidential administration that approach the budgets of entire Ukraine oblasts (provinces).

Yanukovych lives in Mezhyhirya, a 138-hectare estate located in the village of Nova Petrivka on the west bank of the Dnipro River about 22 kilometers to the north of Kyiv’s center. The land traces back to a monastery that was founded there in the 16th century and that the Soviets had destroyed in 1921. Later, the tract became home for top Communist Party officials, including Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), the former leader of the Soviet Union. Yanukovych moved there in 2002 when he left his native Donetsk to serve as prime minister under the former president, Leonid Kuchma, and he has remained there on a tract of 1.7 hectares that he somehow managed to lease for personal use even though it was government land. Virtually everything else about Yanukovych’s relationship to Mezhyhirya is shrouded in secrecy thicker than the forests that abut the tract, although it is also public record that the rest of Mezhyhirya has since been leased out as well without tenders – 7.6 hectares to a Donetsk-based foundation affiliated with Party of Regions and Yanukovych’s elder son Oleksandr called Renaissance of Ukraine, and 129 acres to a Donetsk company, Tanalit, also with close personal ties to the president. Investigative journalists for *Ukrayinska Pravda* have followed the labyrinthine trail of front men and proxy companies related to these leases, and they have reported that since 2007, when Yanukovych was in his second term as prime minister, the entire Mezhyhirya property had come under his personal control. They also report expenditures in the multiple millions of dollars for his family residence, and many millions of dollars more for other construction on the site: a golf course and clubhouse, a boat house and yacht club, tennis courts, a bowling alley, swimming pool, sauna, horse stables and equestrian club, a parking
garage for 70 automobiles, and a dedicated highway between the estate and the main road to Kyiv. There are also reportedly ostriches, llamas, and kangaroos on the grounds, although they do not seem to be visible from satellite photographs. Some of what we know about how Yanukovych has personalized Mezhyhirya comes from journalist Tetyana Chornovil (also written as Tetiana Chornovol), who scaled the 5-meter (16.5 feet) wall “James Bond style” with a tow rope and plank and spent three hours inside the grounds with her camera before she was betrayed by barking dogs.

Whatever there is and is not on these grounds north of Kyiv, it all seems to be paid for by the citizens of Ukraine. Yet, from the beginning to the present there has been virtually no transparency about anything regarding Yanukovych’s relationship to the estate, including leases, land transfers, construction costs, capital improvements, and payments to contractors and suppliers. The result is lots and lots of suspicion and nasty questions about financial conflicts of interests regarding bills for maintenance and capital improvements, and a conclusion on the part of just about anyone who has an interest in the topic that Mezhyhirya has become Yanukovych’s by sleight of hand (Tuchynska, 2013). In what was perhaps an empty offer made during an unguarded moment, Yanukovych once issued an invitation to journalists to see his house, but when a preannounced group arrived at the gates with notebooks and cameras on June 6, 2011, the Day of Journalists holiday in Ukraine, they saw instead the president’s motorcade whiz past them without stopping on its way out of the property. The visitors were greeted, instead, by Yanukovych’s press secretary, who offered flowers and cake as consolation. A different group of journalists did manage to tour the president’s home more recently, but judging from the official film record of the event and the softball questions that the participants asked, the visitors were carefully prescreened and preselected. Indeed, the event appears to be so carefully stage-managed that the president’s house did not even look lived in. More recent information about that tour shows it to have been yet another Yanukovych sleight of hand and a boldfaced lie: the house that the visitors saw was in fact the guest house, a much smaller and more modest structure than the president’s true residence through the trees nearby. Small wonder that it did not look lived in! The actual residence is truly enormous: three stories high as seen from one direction and five stories high from the other because it is built into an excavated slope, and has a footprint that appears to be three or four times larger than the house that the compliant journalists were shown.

The president’s commute to work from Mezhyhirya is a show. Every head of state needs expert security to guard him from possible wrongdoers, and I have no intention of compromising any procedures to protect President
Yanukovych, but within a year after he took office, his travels by motorcade from his gated residence to Kyiv’s center and back, as well as his travels around the city as he conducts his work, started to become legend. I lived just two blocks from his executive office building on Bankova (Bank Street) on a steep hill at the top of my street, so I was able to see the routine many times. It begins with sound, or more precisely the absence of it, when the city’s constant background rumble of automobile tires on cobblestone streets is suddenly stilled. Here, at Evropeyska Ploshcha (European Square) and its connector Hrushevskiyi Street, which lie between Mezhyhirya and Bankova, there are no longer any vehicles on the roads as they have been blocked from entry at side streets, and there are police on foot all along the route making sure that the president’s way is clear. Anyone who is interested looks north, in the direction of Mezhyhirya, in anticipation. It can take as long as ten minutes before he finally arrives, enough time for hundreds and hundreds of drivers who are also in a hurry to have safely passed, but traffic in this whole section of the city is now hopelessly backed up until the president has finished his trip. Occasionally you can hear a frustrated driver’s horn blowing from a side street, but that seems to be the case less and less, as drivers generally know that the traffic stoppage is official and that it does not help to complain.

Then, finally it happens. First, one speeding police car passes by, then another, then a third, then a pair of cars side by side, and then finally an entire fleet of police cars with blue lights and identical black SUVs, also with blue lights, speeding up the hill of Hrushevskiyi Street toward Bankova. The SUVs drive in zigzags and trade places seemingly randomly across all four traffic lanes so as to not offer a target for any potential harm-doer, even if one was to know which vehicle the president was actually in. The shuffling of the vehicles reminds me of a fast and dishonest game of three-card monte. The last vehicle of the motorcade is a Yanukovych trademark: his private yellow VW ambulance/field hospital bus in case harm does come to him. I’ve seen this scene again and again and it never ceases to amaze. Interestingly, that ambulance was recently involved in an accident while trailing behind the president (it has trouble keeping up with the high speed of the front vehicles) and a taxi driver was killed and his two passengers injured. That happened on a highway near the airport when the presidential motorcade was at full throttle. Recently on a stretch of that highway within city limits, I saw that members of the city’s police force were standing at attention, one after another every few feet apart, in anticipation of the motorcade and then snapping smart salutes one after the other as the speeding SUVs passed. This, I am told, is a new procedure in response to a presidential directive that he be shown more respect.
At the conclusion of President Yanukovych's end-of-the-year press conference on December 21, 2011, Mustafa Nayem, a journalist for TVi, an opposition television channel, asked what was described as an “inconvenient” question. It was worded in Russian and was translated into English as follows:

I will ask you the following question. You have spoken of the poor situation of [the] economy in Ukraine and how many people do not feel the improvement in the standard of living and how there is no money in the budget neither for Chernobyl cleanup veterans, nor for Afghanistan war veterans. Yet, every day we observe how your personal life improves. We see you rent a helicopter for one million dollars from the company, which, according to Ukrainian Truth [an opposition news source], belongs to your son or at least is controlled by him. We know that the construction work in Mizhhirya [Mezhyhirya] is performed by the companies under your son's control. Could you tell us where this disproportion comes from and what is the secret of your success? Why is our country doing so bad [sic] and you so well? Thank you.

As seen on YouTube, the president tried to present a relaxed face in response, but then he lost a little of his cool and gave an answer that ended with what was widely interpreted as a personal threat to Nayem. Although Ukrainian is the official language of the country and he sat between Ukrainian flags and in front of a backdrop with words in Ukrainian reading “Press Conference of the President of Ukraine,” Yanukovych spoke in Russian. As translated into English, his exact words were as follows (Nieczypor, 2011):

I will say that what you are so emotionally describing does not interest me at all. I will tell you why. Because ... I have little time for pleasure. Scarcely any. Yesterday, for example, I came home at three in the morning and got up at six. The day before yesterday, it was even earlier. This goes on and on. That is why I do not know the sweet life you are talking about, neither do I know why you constantly discuss my family. I would like to tell you that I do not envy you.

At the point when he said “I don't envy you” (“Ya vam ne zaviduyu”), Yanukovych looked his adversary in the eye and then began to laugh. After a pause,
Nayem laughed back and nodded that he understood what the president had just said. Yanukovych nodded in return and added:

We know each other well and understand each other. ... The rest you can guess.

3.8 Helipad from Hell

Thanks to President Viktor Yanukovych, Kyiv now has a new centerpiece-landmark to complement the golden domes of old churches and monasteries that have long been its principal icons. It is a helipad located smack in the middle of middle-most parkland, i.e., amid the greenery that rises from the level of the Dnipro River to the bluff-top heights of historic Kyiv (Figure 3.4). It is near the nation’s government buildings as well as the spectacular architectural treasure of Pecherska Lavra, the centuries-old Monastery of the Caves that is a UNESCO world heritage site. Conveniently, the helipad is several blocks from the president’s office on Bankova Street, even closer to the parliament building, and almost immediately adjacent to Mariyinsky Palace, the beautiful baroque palace built by the czars in 1744 that is now the official ceremonial residence of Ukraine’s president. A new road with a bridge connects the whirlybird site with all this. The plaza in front of Mariyinsky Palace has a lookout point that has long been popular for its panorama of Kyiv’s parks, the river below, and the flat expanses to the horizon of the city’s Left Bank across the river, but now the foremost feature is a large-footprint, multilevel, reinforced concrete structure with a two-H helipad on its roof and the road-bridge connection directly to the government district. Although details are murky about just how this construction came about, it seems certain that, yes indeed, the president of Ukraine has ordered a wide, blocky, and tall concrete structure to be erected just there, in the center of the view of Kyiv from the river and the Left Bank, and that its roof will be his private heliport.

The construction of this monstrosity was started soon after Yanukovych took office. We learned more than a year after it happened that on December 28, 2010, Kyiv City Council had transferred 2.18 hectares of public park to a private company named Amadeus that is registered in faraway Belize and that was authorized to move forward with construction. There was no announcement that work was to begin or even what was to be built: workers simply started cutting trees in the park, clearing a site the size of a football field. Then, construction equipment and construction workers began to arrive. I witnessed all this. Once the workers started pouring concrete, I
wandered by and asked what they were building. They said that they did not know, and then a security guard came to warn me away. That the structure had to do with helicopters was an open secret and conventional wisdom in Kyiv, as the president has been known to be a whirlybird fan since at least as far back as his campaign for office in 2004, and he could quite easily travel between work in Kyiv and his residence in Mezhyhirya by flying above the river. Moreover, his 38-year-old son Oleksandr Yanukovych is in the helicopter business (allegedly among other concerns that profit from government contracts), and is widely believed to be renting a helicopter to his father for the US$1 million fee to which Nayem referred above.

It is not unusual, of course, for a head of state to have a helicopter and landing spaces at his disposal. The point here is that the president is a raider and the whole structure is rooted in lies: a central slice of the public’s land was taken with no or very limited due process and no transparency whatsoever. Furthermore, the view of Kyiv from the river and the opposite bank, once a spectacular and iconic view of golden church domes, now has front and center among the remaining domes a tall, blocky concrete structure to support the president’s travels. Even though it became known in due course that the main purpose of the structure is a landing place for helicopters, it is still not known what the rest of the structure is – that is, the two levels below the rooftop. There had been various media reports that this large space would be a casino, a discotheque, a bowling alley, a restaurant, or a “cigar hall”
among other possibilities related to leisure and entertainment. In response to reporters’ questions, even the appointed mayor of Kyiv, Oleksandr Popov, could not say what was to be in the building. The most that he could offer was that the project was funded by a “private investor” who expected a return on the investment. A more recent source confirmed that the chief architect for the city of Kyiv, Serhiy Tselovalnyk, was also in the dark, at least initially, as to what the structure would be, but subsequent to that, Tselovalnyk was able to tell reporters that the structure below the landing level on the roof would be a “business and entertainment center.” The city’s chief architect is also on record as defending the helicopter landing place by stating that this particular helicopter base was not built for the president, but for dignitaries who would be arriving for the Euro 2012 football tournament. That did not happen, however, as the helipad was not ready in time. In any event, Tselovalnyk never explained why such an intrusive structure would be built for an event that will last for only a short while. The city’s chief architect then added that this was to be the first of 19 helicopter pads that were being planned for Kyiv so that people in need of emergency medical attention could be more quickly transported to hospitals. However, he said nothing about the fact that this particular landing pad is not near any hospital.

Not long ago, I stood for a long time on a bright and cold winter day at the famous lookout point beside the Mariyinsky Palace and took in the changing panorama as construction workers kept busy just below. As much as the view, I was transfixed by the behavior of Kyivans at the lookout point that day, and I managed to engage some in conversation. As opposed to the reactions that one would expect from people when they come upon a beautiful viewpoint on a sparkingly clear day, here was a somber crowd. They stood quietly, almost motionless, and simply stared. When they did speak to companions, it was in whispers, as if they were afraid of being overheard, or as if they were standing together at the casket of a loved one and were sharing a memory. One pair was reluctant to speak with me until they noted that I was a foreigner, and they then explained that it was the president’s helipad under construction that they came to see, because they had recently heard about it in the media. There was disbelief at the violence to the panorama and sadness that something fundamentally Kyiv had been lost. That’s what they told me straight on, and I was sad for them. No one stayed long. When visitors finally walked away from the scene, they shook their heads.

More recently (summer 2013), I stood again at the same spot looking at what was then the completed building. I had returned to Kyiv for a visit and wanted to see helicopters coming and going. There were none and I
wondered why. The two big H symbols in a circle were big as daylight below me, but there was only stillness. A man ambled over beside me and started a conversation. He stood incredibly close, with his hand holding me near to him by the shoulder or bicep, and his face so close that his saliva splattered my cheeks. I would have escaped except that he was interesting. He was Nikolai (Kolya), aged 65, and told me that he was a retired air force officer. He spoke in Russian. He had approached me to commiserate about Kyiv’s loss and the stupidity of the helipad before us. When he learned that I was a foreigner, he wanted to be sure that I understood what we were looking at: “We [the citizens of Ukraine] did not ask for this building. No one asked us. They just took parkland and built on it. It happens all the time. The president does anything that he wants. He knows no laws.”

I asked what the glass-sheathed levels below the roof contain.

“Only God knows,” he replied. “They never tell us. I don’t even know if it is finished, or if there will be something in the future [that will become known to us]. Whatever is there, it is not for us. Look at all the security. Ask a security guard, and they will say that they do not know what they are guarding. They will tell you to scram.”

He then squeezed my bicep extra firmly and turned up the saliva shower as he explained why there were no helicopters.

“Romashka, listen to me,” he said, using a diminutive form of my name. “The president changed his mind about helicopters. Someone told him that there is no trick to shooting one down. Look at all that forest land below, one side of the river and the other. They cannot patrol it all. This president is famous for his paranoia. The nation’s military forces have gotten smaller over his term, but his personal security apparatus has grown by an even greater amount. We [Ukrainian citizens] pay for all that. No, he has become afraid to fly up and down the river by helicopter. So instead, he is improving the road between here and Mezhyhirya. And this building before us? No one needs it at all. It has spoiled our bluffs. And the bluffs will destroy it. The bluffs are unstable and will erode. The building will crack. It is not a safe structure.

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of all that Nikolai chose to tell me, but I see all the more clearly that, yes indeed, Ukraine is far from heaven and the story of Kyiv today is, sadly but verily, a tragicomedy.