4 Soviet Ways, Post-Soviet Days

4.1 Looking after Lenin

During Soviet times, there was a likeness of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924), Russian revolutionary and founder of the Russian Communist Party and the USSR, in the center of virtually every city and town from the border with Poland and other East Europe satellite states in the west to the Pacific reaches of Siberia in the east. Many communities had multiple Lenins, as statues of him were also erected in front of schools, libraries, and other public buildings, and at factories, rail stations, and virtually everywhere else where there were Soviet citizens to pay homage. Vladimir Ilyich was a ubiquitous icon as well on Soviet political posters and banners, lapel medals and other awards to Soviet heroes, and on postage stamps and currency of various denominations. For a time, the leader’s presence was rivaled by that of Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), but de-Stalinization after the dictator’s death returned Lenin to sole position at the top of Soviet iconography until the Soviet Union itself crashed in 1991. That ushered in a time of choice for citizens of the vast territory, with the result that a great many statues of Lenin were opportunistically toppled or dismantled, often to great cheers from crowds in anticipation of better days. The first such event in Ukraine apparently took place in L’viv on September 14, 1990. After that, Lenin removals spread or were repeated almost instantly in many other areas of Ukraine and in other collapsing Soviet republics, and they have continued sporadically ever since in the post-USSR era, sometimes via dead-of-night vandalism (Wanner, 1998, pp. 172-199).

In Kyiv, we have a story of Lenins removed, Lenins that never were, and one prominent Lenin who still stands. Its history with the statues is, therefore, probably somewhat typical of the former USSR, although as a bigger urban place and strategically important because of military research and industrial production, there were probably more Lenin statues in the city than in most other Soviet cities. With respect to removal of Lenins after the end of the Soviet Union, Kyiv is probably somewhat in the middle for Ukraine. In the west of the country, Lenin statues were taken down with glee as soon as it was possible to do so, starting with the toppling of the statue in front of the Opera Theater in L’viv. Instead, monuments to icons of Ukrainian nationalism were erected in these cities. In the east and south of the country, by contrast, where the Russian language dominated and the Communist Party was stronger, most cities tended to retain their Lenin
Kyiv's middle path reflects its geographic centrality and perhaps that, as capital, it reflects all regions of the country. A young student in Kharkiv, Varvara Podnos, daughter of a prominent sociologist who coaches her on the topic, has undertaken a large project to inventory the principal monuments and statues that stand in the centers of all the hundreds of cities and towns across Ukraine, and to prepare a map of the nation that shows who stands where in post-Soviet Ukraine.

We have already touched on one of the Lenin statues that was removed after independence, the one that stood in the rotunda of what is now Ukrainian House, formerly the Lenin Museum, and for a number of years, a place of limbo for the Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv (Chapter 2). That statue did not stay long, as the museum's lifespan was only 1982-1993. Now, as I write this, fully half of the façade of the structure is a banner advertising Audi automobiles from Germany, and at the top of the stairs is a fiberglass swimming pool on its side with a sign inviting pool shoppers to see the displays. A much larger statue of Lenin stood just down the street in October Revolution Square. It was erected in 1977 in connection with the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, when the square was renamed from Kalinin Square, and was a huge cubist monument carved from granite. This is today's Independence Square and the site is where the Independence Monument now stands. This granite Lenin was neither toppled by joyous crowds nor quickly disassembled, because at some 1,000 tons the figure was one of the largest monuments in the Soviet Union and removal would take weeks. The head alone weighed 15 tons. Moreover, the sculpture's removal had implications for the integrity of the subway concourse that was beneath the plaza and required expert engineering. Nevertheless, it was only two weeks or so after the proclamation of Ukrainian independence that the task of separating the sculpture's pieces was started (on September 9, 1991) on orders of Kyiv's mayor and the Cabinet of Ministers. Happy crowds witnessed the process. Eventually, the monument was trucked off in 84 pieces for storage on the grounds of 8 Pylypa Orlyka, at the time the site of the Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv, and then seven years later, after the museum was evicted in favor of the Supreme Court of Ukraine, the components were taken to a place called A.T. Ukrrestavratsiya to be recycled for new needs. Perhaps that was to guarantee that this Lenin would never return.

Even after this changeover, there were still as many as 18 statues of Lenin left in Kyiv as late after independence as 2008, as well as monuments to other Soviet leaders. A particular case in point was the much-hated statue of the much-hated Hryhoriy Ivanovych Petrovsky (1878-1958) that stood on
European Square across the way from the Lenin Museum. He had been a close ally of both Lenin and Stalin, was a former top official of the Soviet secret police, and was a fully complicit prime minister of Ukraine during the great famine (Holodomor) during which millions of Ukrainian peasants perished. Yet his stony likeness remained in place until late 2009. There had been attacks by vandals for years and episodes of graffiti (“To Petrovsky, executioner of the Ukrainian people”), but it was not until an order by President Viktor Yushchenko just before a memorial celebration of the Holodomor that this particular monument was removed. Some of the 18 Lenins were removed, too, to popular calls demanding “Lenina na smitnyk!” (Lenin for the trash heap!), but perhaps as many as half still survive. For most citizens, the “minor Lenins” are not a bother and simply reflect history, and not many people give them much thought. Some Ukrainians, however, object strenuously to any monuments to Soviet leaders and occasionally respond with vandalism. It was this that did in Kyiv’s statue of Nadezhda Krupsakaya (1898-1939), the wife of Vladimir Lenin and also a revolutionary activist. She lost her nose on June 16, 2010.

There is one very non-minor monument to Vladimir Lenin that still stands in the city, nearly seven decades after its erection. He is also on Khreshchatyk. This is “Bessarabian Lenin,” so called because across the street is the Bessarabian Market, a fresh-food bazaar named after an historic region in the south of Ukraine. Unveiled in 1946, it is a full-length statue of the revolutionary leader made of red granite. It stands 3.45 meters high atop a black granite pediment that is almost twice as tall. This particular monument was spared demolition perhaps because it is a part of postwar reconstruction history, or because it has more artistic merit than run-of-the-mill Lenins. It may also have been an appeasement to that fraction of Ukraine’s and (Kyiv’s) population that venerates the man. Whatever the reason for its longevity, “Bessarabian Lenin” has been a flash point between opposing sides in Ukraine’s politics ever since independence and in recent years has come to be the target of deliberate vandalism. Lenin’s nose and a part of his left hand were smashed with a sledgehammer on June 30, 2009, by a small group of nationalistic Ukrainians, and then red paint was thrown at the statue (it actually landed on the base) on November 27 of that year just as members of the Communist Party were cheering its unveiling after restoration.

14 In a later development, this statue was toppled by Euromaidan protestors on December 8, 2013, and smashed to bits.
Fearing more attacks, members of the Communist Party take shifts in a round-the-clock watch over the statue. According to a Kyiv Post article entitled “Lenin Stands Tall and Guarded” (Oleshko, 2010), there are reportedly eight sentries who take turns at 12-hour day and night shifts. They do this not for the small amount of money that they are paid by the party, but reportedly because of ideological conviction. A red tent at the statue’s base provides shelter in bad weather and a place to rest. There is also a police vehicle on site with two police officers in case of a confrontation. On days when a Ukrainian nationalist group (such as the Svoboda Party) holds a rally in central Kyiv, the communists turn up at the Lenin monument in greater numbers to keep a close watch over their hero, and on days when the communists rally, they often start or finish their marches at this statue. On April 22, 2010, while communists were laying flowers at the statue on the occasion of the 140th anniversary of Lenin’s birth, other Ukrainians had made an effigy and had Lenin kneel at a monument to the Holodomor to ask for forgiveness. To them, it mattered not that Lenin had died some eight years before the Stalin-imposed famine.

There is also the story of the giant Lenin that never was. It was part of a plan that was put forward in 1935 to make Kyiv into an architecturally complete and truly socialistic center of Soviet Ukraine, and to build a monumental center for Soviet Ukrainian government on the high hill where the capital of historic Rus once stood. Two ancient churches, the Monastery of St. Michael of the Golden Domes and the Church of St. Basil, were dynamited to make way for the project, and a grand boulevard/pavade ground to be lined with imposing office buildings for government ministries was planned from the promontory where they had stood to the sprawling complex of religious structures that centered on St. Sophia Cathedral, which itself would be converted into a government museum of history and architecture. A statue of Lenin would rise from one part of the once-religious promontory above the river. The problem was this: which way should Lenin face? If he faced the river, which made sense given the bluff-top perch, then his back would be to the parade ground, which made no sense. Alternatively, if he faced the parade ground, then he would also be extending his arm, as seems to be his favorite pose, not just to the parades but also to St. Sophia. That would definitely be a no-no. Even worse, if he faced the parade ground, and even if Sophia were to be removed from the scene altogether, as was also an option, his butt would be aimed at Moscow. In the Great Terror, that would have invited a ticket to Siberia or worse for any- and everyone involved. As far as I know, no one dared to suggest a revolving pedestal as a solution, i.e., a uniquely “revolutionary Lenin.”
Thus, the discussions about plans wore on, architects showed blueprints to commissions of experts, but nothing was built. Incredibly, for a time there was a volleyball court on the site. Then the Germans arrived without an invitation, and that was that.

4.2 Red Army Birthday

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but there are still many vestiges of Soviet life in Ukraine. Some citizens have an unapologetic nostalgia for the Soviet past and are determined to keep alive the traditions and celebrations that they hold dear. Historian Catherine Wanner has written about this subject and Ukraine specifically (1998). As we move forward to concentrate on the great changes that have swept across the country since independence, we pause here at a bridge between the two worlds to reflect on a particular day and a particular event that both recalls the routines of citizens’ life in the recent past and, I think, shows hesitancy by some citizens to move the clock forward to today’s time. The story is all the more interesting because it takes place on Independence Square, which is commonly called simply Maidan (Public Square), precisely where a hulking granite memorial to Vladimir Lenin had stood until 1991, and where there is now the tall column that is the Independence Monument. I write from my notes from February 23, 2011, a day that factions in Ukraine revere as the anniversary date for the founding of the Soviet Red Army and that is known in Ukraine, Russia, and other parts of the former USSR as the Day of the Defenders of the Homeland. I could also have been writing about October 7, the anniversary of the October Revolution, another holiday that, for some, is a day of nostalgia for communist rule. I have heard fervent participants in such events referred to uncharitably as “people from the past.”

For more than two weeks, Independence Square had been closed off with a high wooden wall, and its perimeter was patrolled in twos and threes by roving guards. Why? The official reason was to repair damage to stone pavement tiles that occurred during a period of mass protest near the end of the previous year. These were protests about tax issues by shop owners and other small business entrepreneurs that went on for day after day in November and December 2010. On some days there were 10,000 or more people present. They were energized and boisterous, angry about the financial squeeze that they were in, and chanted slogans against the president and the Party of Regions, and about revolution. It was said that tent stakes that had been driven between tiles had caused damage, but I saw with my own eyes that
there was really nothing significantly wrong, and that no repairs were being made. Clearly, damage to the pavement was not the reason to wall off the square. Broken pavements elsewhere in the city are usually left as they are to become even worse, and if repairs are made, it is never done by closing off an entire area. This wall around the square existed to keep protestors away. They never had their issues satisfactorily settled, and those in power feared that once good weather returned, there might be another Orange Revolution. There were small groups of protestors who gathered from time to time outside the walled perimeter, clearly in a mood to pick up where they had left off some two months earlier. All of us agreed that the fence was there simply to prevent a new wave of mass gatherings, and that the security patrols were simply guarding the fence to make sure that no one knocked it down.

During the night from Saturday to Sunday, February 19 to 20, the walls came down and Maidan was opened for the first time since the protestors were scattered in December. Why? Trucks arrived with workers and equipment, along with the equipment needed to set up an enormous sound system, and then by Wednesday the 23rd the answer was obvious: there would be a celebration of the anniversary of the birth of the Soviet Red Army. This day had been a traditional holiday in the USSR, and some people in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus still celebrate it. They do so now with official Party of Regions sponsorship. I was new to this, not having personally experienced the Soviet Union and found what transpired during the evening of the celebration to be fascinating.

As it happens I was on the street at 6 p.m. on that day, just in time to see a crowd emerging from a subway entry on my block. They kept coming, dozens of them, hundreds, all going in the same direction, down the street toward Maidan. Within 10 minutes, out of nothing, there was a mass of several hundred individuals at the end of my street, near Maidan but not in it, standing in discrete groups – a hundred here, another hundred or so there, still another hundred a few feet away... Some were older people, older than me, men and women in leather coats or in furs. Gold teeth glistened. There were also young people – college student types. They were in their own groups of about a hundred. I already had a good idea about what was going on, but decided to play the role of the puzzled foreigner so that I could ask questions. I asked some passersby what was going on, but they said that they had never seen such a thing before and were wondering the same thing. I now conclude that such nonanswers were probably an echo of Soviet Kyiv: the less you claim to know and the less you say, the better off you will be.

I started questioning the people in the organized groups. Some of them had carried canvas bags of collapsible flag poles and flags, and they began
distributing these items to their charges as they lined them up row by row, 5 across and about 20 deep. The flags were Ukrainian blue and yellow, and the blue and white “map flags” of the ruling party of Ukraine, Yanukovych’s Party of Regions. The most anyone would tell me was that it was a praznik (holiday) and they had come to celebrate. There would be a concert, they said. They would not answer when I commented about how organized they seemed, how they all appeared all of the sudden from nowhere, and why they were so neatly lined up. Maidan was empty and the stage was set: it was marked “February 23, Party of Regions, Glory to the Defenders of the Homeland.” I asked why they weren’t going into Maidan for the concert, why they remained standing at the side of the square, and all I got was the reply that “we will go in soon.” Someone managed to tell me that the groups were organized by raion (region of the city). At precisely 6:30, all of them moved at once the 150 to 200 feet to the open plaza and took their places in orderly groups in front of the stage. Before they left their staging area, I took some photographs and observed people turning their faces away from the camera. I kept trying to talk to people, and I was continually told, “No comment” or “I will not answer your question.” “Why do you bother us?” they asked me. “It’s a holiday. February 23. We came here for a concert.”

I also photographed the attendance-takers. Yes, I said attendance-takers. Each group had at least one person with a book in which were handwritten names. They were checking off people as present. The books were identical from group to group in size and shape. When I started asking why attendance was being taken, some book-handlers got angry. When I asked if the people were being paid to attend the praznik and hear the concert, some laughed me off as ridiculous, others got angry, and others turned away and tried to hide. Even though I knew full well that what I was witnessing was a carryover from the Soviet period of compulsory participation in official events, I kept up the role of disoriented foreigner and asked why they were afraid: “You can tell by how I speak that I am not from here. I can’t do anything to you. Why are you afraid of me?” The response: “We are not afraid of you. This is a democracy. We just do not want to talk with you.” By the way, any responses that I was given, as well as verbal brush-offs, were consistently in Russian, even if it was Ukrainian that I was using.

The concert began precisely at 7:00 p.m. I had tried to get on stage before then, as I often manage to do in this country where if you are brazen enough, uncertain security guards will fear you as probably being one of their superiors. However, this time I was stopped. The guards and I had a big laugh that a foreigner was so disoriented that he did not know better. I asked with feigned bewilderment why there was the sudden appearance
of so many hundreds of people in such precision and who was behind this, and they laughed again and said, laughing, that this is a democracy and people are here for a holiday concert. I asked if the crowd is being paid and they said, while laughing, that all they know is that they are security guards and that they are being paid themselves for their work, but that this is a democracy and people can come to a concert if they want to. “No, no one is forced to be here; they are here because this a praznik, and they came for the concert,” one of the guards said while laughing.

The concert opened with a military officers men’s chorus (Figure 4.1). They performed patriotic, military anthems in Ukrainian and Russian. There were politicians from the Party of Regions in dark suits and conservative neckties. The one first spoke in Ukrainian, the second in Russian. They offered platitudes about defending the Ukrainian homeland, about the bravery of war veterans, and about the glorious Party of Regions and its love for democracy. There was a good-looking female MC and a handsome male co-MC. She spoke in Ukrainian; he alternated with her in Russian – not one translating the other, just intertwining the languages. Then came more acts. A much be-medaled (20 to 30 medals on one chest) veteran of the Afghanistan War sang songs to heroism in Afghanistan. He was followed by rock singers who performed in Russian, Ukrainian, and English as the

Figure 4.1  A scene from the Soviet-like February 22 (2011) “Defenders of the Homeland” celebration. The words read “Party of Regions Ukraine.”
song required. Then the stage was given to a bevy of dancing babes in fur coats. Oh yes, it was about 12 degrees F (-11 degrees C).

After that, there were still more acts and still more speeches. I took pictures. I managed to sneak up on stage, at the side, and took crowd shots. I tried talking with people. They shooed me away. Occasionally, someone would approach me and ask where I was from. Sometimes I would say that I am Ukrainian. “No, where are you from?” they would press. “Over there, on Horodetskoho Street,” I would answer. At other times my reply was like this: “I am Ukrainian. I am here in the capital of Ukraine, speaking to you in *ridna mova* (the native tongue), the official language of the government of Ukraine. You ask me in Russian where I am from? I should ask you where you are from?” They walked away at that point and you could hear the mumbling: “Provocateur.” I suppose they were right.

It was damned cold but the concert wore on and on. There was a front line of people who paid attention and were engaged with the music. But most people paid no mind to what was on stage. They milled about, spoke among themselves, ducked belowground to subway level for warmth and tea. They looked incredibly bored and incredibly cold. There was no answer to the question, “Why are you still here in this miserable cold if you are not enjoying the show?” As the music went on, the front line got thinner, and the “I can’t wait to get out of here” crowds in the back kept growing. I concluded that the old people knew the meaning of the event. More than one told me that they were veterans or widows of veterans. The young people had no idea what this was about. I concluded that they were students on a part-time earning opportunity.

A very fat old lady (my age) was leaving early. She could barely walk, she was so fat, it was so cold, and there were slippery stairs. I offered her my hand. She hesitated for a moment but took it. For the next few minutes, I escorted her to the subway entrance and we talked. She was amazed by my courtesy. “Oh, you are an American!” And she asked some questions about my background and where in America I was from. I asked her if she enjoyed the concert. She said, “They told me to come, so I came.”

4.3 One Day in the Life of the Ukrainian Language

The day is June 5, 2012, graduation day for my students from a year earlier at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, and simultaneously a momentous day at the Verkhovna Rada where Ukraine’s fight-club lawmakers were set to vote on a the first reading of a proposed new law that
would change the language of the country. Instead of Ukrainian as the sole official language of Ukraine as stipulated in the country’s postindependence constitution of 1996, the proposal by Yanukovych’s Party of Regions would add their language, Russian, as a second official language in parts of Ukraine that wanted that option. It also opens the door for Romanian near the western border and possibly other languages, although it is really a question of Ukrainian, Russian, or both. The topic is immensely hot in Ukraine, especially at times of political electioneering, and is seen by many citizens as vitally important for how Ukraine evolves in the future. The issue inspires enormous passion on both sides, Ukrainian-only or Ukrainian and Russian. I juggled both venues that day, graduation on campus and the protests that were taking place outside Verkhovna Rada, as did many of the graduates, their teachers, and university administrators. Supporters of the Ukrainian-only side speak Russian as well and many use it daily. However, their argument is that in a country with a history of long domination by a much larger and characteristically acquisitive Russian neighbor, there can be no true independence without critical breaks in the public sphere from the Russian past. “Without our language there can be no nation,” is a translation of one of the slogans of the pro-Ukrainian side, while I read another, “No Language – No Ukraine,” splashed across the cover of an English-language edition of a major news magazine that also took a stand on the question (The Ukrainian Week, 9 (32), June 2012). I want to tell the story of what transpired that day at Verkhovna Rada in order to bring more focus on the issues involved, to introduce Kyiv more closely as the capital nation where two major languages are in use, and also to say something about Kyiv as a diverse city in which the linguistic divisions of Ukraine matter little on a daily basis.

The roots of the language conflict in Ukraine lie in the long history of the country as a part of the Russian and then Russian-Soviet Empires, during which times Russian was imposed on the local population, many Russians were resettled onto Ukrainian lands and into Ukrainian cities, and the Ukrainian language was, as a rule, denigrated both by the state and in ordinary social relations. During these times, Ukrainian remained strong in the small towns and countryside of the west and center of the country, while in the industrial cities of eastern and southern Ukraine, Russian came to be the dominant language. Russian was also the state language across much of Ukrainian territory, and the language into which many ethnic Ukrainians and other non-Russians in the country were acculturated. Furthermore, to be more precise, much of the west and center of Ukraine was Polish as well, with the Polish language being seen by many ethnic Ukrainians as a
colonial tongue just like Russian was in other parts of the country. There was also a large population that communicated in Yiddish. An outcome of this geography was that Ukrainian became identified as a peasants’ or farmers’ tongue, while Russian (or Polish in the West) was thought of as the language of industry, modernity, and urban-intellectual life. Writers who bucked this pattern by creating beautiful and sophisticated literary works in “the language of peasants” such as Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913), Panas Myrny (1849-1920), Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky (1864-1913), and Ivan Franko (1856-1916), instilled Ukrainian national pride in the face of neighbors and are still regarded as great national heroes.

The 20th century removed Poles to across newly drawn international borders and, in the worst of all crimes, destroyed the country’s Jewish communities altogether, eventually leaving the country as a territory with essentially just two main languages, Ukrainian and Russian. When independence came to the country in 1991, much of the Ukrainian language faction of the country (which constitutes about 42.8 percent of the population as defined by those who speak the language at home) typically rejoiced in the rebirth of the Ukrainian language, while much of the slightly smaller Russian-speaking population (38.6 percent), which is concentrated mainly in the east and south, felt put upon and had to either learn a new language or start kicking. When their man Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych, a Russian speaker and bumbler in Ukrainian, was elected president in 2010, the swing back to Russian commenced in earnest, leading to what took place on June 5.

Yanukovych’s Party of Regions had been kicking about language for some time, particularly through its chief ideologue on the issue, the aforementioned Dmytro Tabachnyk, whom Yanukovych appointed to the nation's Minister of Science and Education and the person whom the young Daria Stepanenko slapped in the face with flowers (Chapter 1). Both Yanukovych and Tabachnyk have seen themselves as being on a mission to undo much of what the pro-Ukrainian Orange Revolution had accomplished before 2010, particularly with respect to what they see as the forcing of Ukrainian down the throats of Russian speakers; their party, therefore, introduced the legislation in question. We have already seen the Ukrainian Fight Club (Verkhovna Rada) in action. During an evening session in parliament on May 24, 2012, when the language proposal was placed on the docket, yet

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15 These numbers are for 2011 and are from survey data maintained by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine as quoted in Kramar (2012). Some 17.1 percent of respondents answered that they speak both Russian and Ukrainian at home. Also see Duda (2012).
another fistfight erupted. I don’t know who started it or who landed blows on whom, but regardless of who was more at fault, the two sides went at it for quite some time. During the peak of the melee, a score or more lawmakers pummeled one another with their fists, threw burly bodies over podiums and other furniture, and ripped one another’s clothes. This continued for at least 5 minutes and 11 seconds as was seen in an action-packed video shown on YouTube.16 Two weeks later, on June 5, a vote on the first reading was rushed into action by the Party of Regions majority.

Word spreads fast in Kyiv when there is a big issue at hand and a protest is being organized. Many activists are on the Internet daily and follow news from like-minded people and organizations about upcoming events, including calls to action. I personally learned about the protest by the pro-Ukrainian side the day before by different means: a stranger on the street in the city’s downtown handed me a newspaper from which fell a printed flyer about the planned protest. “Be there at Verkhovna Rada at 9 a.m.” the notice said, “because survival of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine is at stake and we need to voice our opinions.” The radio news the next morning over breakfast said that the planned protest was looking to be huge, but that in all directions around Kyiv police were stopping busses with protestors headed toward the city and turning them back. In two years of the Yanukovych administration, the tactic of limiting access to the capital had already become established as a hallmark method for limiting the voices of opposition. Another tactic, even more explicitly geographical, has been to limit access to protest sites. Before the Orange Revolution, much of Independence Square in the center of Kyiv had been redesigned with the addition of fountains, benches, greenery, and minor monuments arranged in a way that inhibited large gatherings, and then after the ascension of Yanukovych to power, other more novel ways were found to control gatherings and protests on the more open rest of the square. In Ukraine, as perhaps in other countries, too, he who controls the main public spaces can control what the news reports from those spaces and can therefore shape public opinion either for against any person or issue.

This protest was scheduled for the public space in front of Verkhovna Rada rather than for Independence Square about a kilometer away. I had been to many protests there before. This time, there was a surprise. I came with a friend and we arrived just after 9 a.m., and saw that the president had ratcheted up his strategy of controlling public space for protest to a new level. Overnight thousands and thousands of supporters of the Party

16 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETU8Hdwh7Nc
of Regions had been bussed into Kyiv and brought by rail from Regionnaire strongholds and implanted from about 7 a.m. as a thick and densely populated human cordon between arriving protesters and the building in which the vote would be held. They waved blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flags and the blue-and-white flags of their party, and they looked like a loving crowd to the TV cameras. “Yanukovych, Our President” was a common placard sign and the slogan that was written on the backs of the blue raincoats that had been passed out on this day with a threat of rain. What is more, these particular citizens of Ukraine were contained within an iron fence of a type that is commonly used in riot and other security situations. The police (militsia) stood in a line within the fence with them to create still another barrier against arriving protesters, leading to a microgeography in which protestors had no recourse but to remain on the far side of a barrier while the police, an Iron Curtain, and a line of young Regionnaires who looked for all the world like thugs stood just behind the police and protected (or imprisoned, as some observers said) the mass of transportees inside. There was Ukrainian music broadcast over Regionnaire loudspeakers for the TV microphones to pick up, and speaker after speaker, speaking in Russian, who professed love for Ukraine but hatred for the Orange Revolution. Some pro-Ukrainian protestors shouted taunts across the cordon, and there were equally vile taunts that came back. At its basest, the dialogue was something like this: “Go back to Russia you communist bastards” from the Ukrainian side, and “Go back to Germany, you fuckin’ Nazis” from inside the barrier. When the taunting seemed to escalate, still another layer of security was added between the two sides – a column of police in riot gear in close formation along the outside of the barrier to complement the layer of police inside the barrier.

I went inside; I always manage a way. I found a place along the fence where there was a narrow opening that was being guarded not by police, but by civilian supporters of the Party of Regions, and talked my way though. The “guard” who challenged me was no more than a tough-looking teenager in street-thug clothes. He had pimples. I intimidated him by aggressively reminding him that he was but a kid who was not bright enough to know who I was, and he simply stepped aside. Then until the rains came, I walked among the Regionnaires, looked, listened, and asked questions. They were paid to be there. Most people said that they were not paid when I asked and were suspicious of my question, asking if I was being paid by the opposition to ask it, but enough of them acknowledged that yes, they had been gathered for the event with the promise of money. The amounts that I heard were 135, 150 and 160 hryvnia for 9 hours of duty, about US$16 to US$20. Those who
looked like students said that they cared not a bit about politics but needed the money. Old ladies and old soldiers denied being paid, and challenged me after hearing me speak Ukrainian or Ukrainian-accented Russian, and they wanted to have nothing to do with me except to heap abuse. And that some of them did. The oldsters are even more financially strapped than students, I think, and were paid, too, I am sure. I checked with a news crew and they seemed surprised that I even asked: “Of course, this is a paid audience. How can you not know that?” That was, of course, routinely the case in Soviet times, when the Communist Party was always able to guarantee a large and “happy” turnout whenever one was needed by inducements, threats, or both.

Some of the Regionnaires had traveled all night to be at their assigned places within the human shield, but others claimed to be Kyivans who had arrived spontaneously out of conviction for the cause of the Russian language. I caught one person in a lie about this, because it was clear that he knew nothing about the city. I can also conclude about this audience that they were totally disinterested in the speakers, paid no attention at all, and said to me again and again that it was just “blah-blah-blah” from the podium. There was little cheering, even when a speaker punctuated his speech with a loud “Hoorah!” into the microphone, and only some signs of audience participation with the music. Mostly, the crowd of Party of Regions supporters entertained itself with conversation. Like the audience at the Red Army birthday celebration described earlier, they had come in groups from given neighborhoods, cities, and local party committees, stood together in those groups, and chatted. Old people and heavy people sat on the supports of the riot fencing.

Meanwhile, the friend I came with did not have the luxury of being able to mix it up with Regionnaires as I did because she was a Ukrainian local. I could always rely on the American passport in my pocket to get me out of trouble, even though I have never needed it, and therefore could brave “foreign territory.” I also have the advantage of being a senior citizen and, therefore, am harder to hit. My friend found her way to the far side of the Verkhovna Rada building where the main group of pro-Ukrainian language protesters had set up their activities in a park that is not normally used for such gatherings. There was little security there, and as many thousands if not more people than had been paid to shout for the Party of Regions. These protestors came freely and were much more animated. A number of mutual friends were there, including people we both knew from NaUKMA. Again, there was Ukrainian music, as well as readings of apt poetry, but in this venue the speeches were all in Ukrainian. The history of linguistic colonialism in Ukraine was mentioned prominently, as was this side’s
conviction that in the face of a history of Russian imperialism in Ukraine, the Russian language cannot be allowed to have equal status. A student from NaUKMA was wearing a T-shirt with a message in English on the back that was addressed to football fans from other countries who were arriving to see the 2012 European championship matches. She stood still for me as I photographed the text:

**Dear guests of Ukraine!**

We are united not only with our joy of football. Most Ukrainians want to see Ukraine in the commonwealth of European nations. We feel ourselves a part of Europe.

The Ukrainian Parliament intends to adopt a law that will exterminate the Ukrainian language at first, and then – Ukraine. Possibly this could happen during Euro-2012. We do not want to spoil your football holidays, but we love our country very much and cannot let out authorities destroy it. Therefore, we beg your pardon if protest actions and demonstrations somehow cause inconvenience for you and spoil your vacation.

We hope for your understanding.

Other speakers on the pro-Ukrainian side of the Verkhovna Rada building included representatives from the political party of Yulia Tymoshenko, the imprisoned political opponent of President Yanukovych who has caused such a global stir, and Vitaliy Volodymyrovych Klitschko in person, the reigning WBC Heavyweight Champion (boxing), holder of an honest PhD (in Physical Science and Sports) from the prestigious Kyiv National University of Taras Shevchenko, leader of the political party Udar and a possible opposition candidate for president. Interestingly, both Tymoshenko and Klitschko grew up speaking Russian and adopted Ukrainian as their main language when the country became Ukrainian. In another zone near Verkhovna Rada, another group of pro-Ukrainian language protestors had gathered, those affiliated with the right-wing Ukrainian political party Svoboda. This party is especially strong in the west of Ukraine. Their members often show little tolerance for Russians or other minorities, and one often finds lurking among them the same kind of mean-looking thugs that mark the Party of Regions.

Then came the rains. I requisitioned a supply of party-branded raincoats from the Regionnaires but have them still packaged in case I need to return them, and I watched as the Regionnaire crowds scattered. There
were loudspeaker admonitions against leaving, but most of the “captives” within the official cordon took off just the same. I made a tough-looking police commander laugh when I asked whether the people were leaving because they had been paid for dry weather duty only. The Ukrainian side scattered, too, but not as quickly, and many stayed to continue their protest. Before long, it was announced that the parliamentarians had cast their votes and that the Regionnaire-sponsored measure had passed with 234 of 450 votes. Of the 234 yes votes, only 172 were cast by parliamentarians who were actually present in person; the other “yes” votes were cast by persons who were present on behalf of absentee. This is a common practice in the Verkhovna Rada but is against regulations. We also heard that there were more fistfights on the floor at the time of the voting, and that at least three members of parliament who were absent and were recorded as having voted “yes” have already protested that they had instructed that their votes should be “no.”

I am not going to take you any further on the language issue, as I am writing these particular passages mostly on the day immediately after the event. News evolves, and I would be continually updating text. Readers who are interested know how to follow up on developments on their own. Instead, I want to return to the graduation ceremony for my students that also took place on this turbulent day, and to reflect on what I saw and heard there. Speakers did acknowledge that the day was a milestone (my term) in the history of the Ukrainian language, and then they challenged graduating students as the next generation of leaders in the country to build the Ukraine that they desired rather than accept the one that is orchestrated for them. There was sideways comment from the podium that graduates of NaUKMA are now in positions all over the world, contributing their energies and skills in new societies, and a reminder that they are needed for work in Ukraine as well. Some successful and wealthy NaUKMA graduates from previous years were introduced to give scholarships and research grants to top students and faculty, and to stand as models for building a good life in Ukraine and assisting the country.

These proceedings were all in Ukrainian, as Ukrainian is, along with English, NaUKMA’s official language, but as students chatted informally afterwards among themselves and with proud family members, they did so in Ukrainian, Russian, or a mix of both. Because it is the national capital, Kyiv often becomes the scene of extremely heated passions between opponents who have gathered from various directions to shout about important issues, but its own population reflects all regions of Ukraine, as does the population of NaUKMA (at least somewhat), and local people use whichever language
they want in unofficial communication. No one is on anyone's case about language except crazies from the extremes and, often quite visibly, aging Americans and Canadians of Ukrainian descent on visits to the homeland who were taught intolerance of Russian. Most Kyivans change and mix languages as they wish. Moreover, there is a manner of speaking called surzhyk that blends Ukrainian and Russian quite nicely on a day-to-day basis, with no punches being thrown and no one thinking twice about the other's preferred tongue.

A friend who visited me in Kyiv from St. Petersburg once introduced me to a lovely couple about my age, Vladyslava and Vladimir Dmytrenko. He had had a successful career as diplomat in various countries for the Soviet Union, and then until retirement was ambassador from independent Ukraine to a mix of African countries, some in turn and others simultaneously. The Dmytrenkos invited us to dinner in their beautiful apartment on a high floor in a tall building in Obolon, an up-and-coming prestige area north of the center of Kyiv, during which the subject of language in Ukraine came up. We were conversing in Russian, and I asked what my hosts thought would be the language of choice in Ukraine in the future. Vladimir had a ready answer and took me to the balcony to show me. Young people in Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine (and elsewhere in the planned housing estates of the former Soviet Union, I suppose) have an interesting way of flirting, passing “I love you” messages to one another, and wishing one another a happy birthday, etc., by writing graffiti on sidewalks and the rooftops of low kiosk buildings and garages in car parks, that can be read from the windows and balconies of apartments above. For example, when Uliana wakes up on her birthday, she can look out her window and see that her boyfriend or her circle of close friends had written birthday greetings on the sidewalk below. Residential areas such as Obolon have lots of such graffiti, and residential areas with lower incomes and less prestige might have even more. Vladimir explained this system of communication to me, and then asked me to pick out the various messages that could be read from his balcony on the 16th floor and tally them by language. I came up with six messages: three in Ukrainian, two in Russian, and one that could have been either. Ukrainian wins! According to this very intelligent diplomat's theory, this signals that the Ukrainian language will gain in the future, because these graffiti were insights to the language of free choice, of spontaneity, and of affairs of the heart for the next generation. I said something that it might mean instead that Ukrainian speakers are more apt to write graffiti, but he would not hear of that.
4.4 May 18, 2013

It might be too early to declare that this date is one for the history books of Ukraine, if only as a footnote, but it could well be that such will be the case. At least that is what I thought on that day. On this particular Saturday, two large rallies were held in Kyiv by opposing political factions in preparation for elections to be held in 2015 for president and other offices. It was also the Day of Europe celebration, so the three main opposition parties to President Yanukovych and his Party of Regions, the political parties named Batkivshchyna (Fatherland), Svoboda (Freedom), and the aforementioned Udar, selected this date to hold a mass rally to announce that they would unite to field just one candidate against Yanukovych to maximize their chance of defeating him. The three parties are normally rivals, but Yanukovych is so despised that they have endeavored to overlook their differences. The rally was scheduled to start in European Square, with marchers then proceeding up the slope to St. Sophia Square where a stage and speaker systems were set up for the signing of the agreement and the speeches. I was there for the entire event, from the time that protestors began to gather at European Square until the end of the programming in front of the St. Sophia historical site some four hours later, and stood in a pressing throng several feet from the podium to witness the three party principals affix their signatures to the agreement and shake hands. There was Arsenyi Yatsenyuk, the leader of Batkivshchyna, the party of the imprisoned Yulia Tymoshenko; Oleh Tyahnybok the charismatic head of Svoboda; and Vitalyi Klitschko, the iron-fisted champion of Udar. They waved to the crowd and smiled broadly, and they promised in their speeches to agree on one candidate for 2015, to make sure that “that criminal clan from Dontesk,” as the Regionnaires are called by the opposition, is defeated. On the stage with them were almost all the opposition members of the Verkhovna Rada, those from their own parties, from other opposition parties, and some independents. There were chants of “Yuli volyu!” (“Freedom for Yulia!”) and “Bandu het!” (“Out with the gang!”), patriotic Ukrainian songs, and flags of Ukraine, of each of the three parties, and those with a portrait of the braided-blonde Yulia Tymoshenko. The event was called Vstavay, Ukraino! (Rise Up, Ukraine!). Maybe the movement will lead to something (Figure 4.2).

At the same time, the Regionnaires held their own rally in opposition to the opposition. They picked the same day and hours specifically to counter their three opponents, and they were joined by the Communist Party of Ukraine. Their faithful marched from where they had gathered near the Museum of the Great Patriotic War (Chapter 5) to European Square, which
had in turn been vacated by their marching nemeses. They called their event a “rally against fascism.” Because their political base is the Russian-speaking east and south of Ukraine, the Party of Regions strategy is to demonize the opposition as dangerous Ukrainian nationalists, Nazi sympathizers, and bigots against all things Russian, including the very many Ukrainian citizens who speak primarily Russian. They are enabled in this strategy by the apparent affinity of right-wing Ukrainians, including quite prominently some tough-looking skinheads, for the Svoboda Party, and by Svoboda’s own origins in 1991 as the “Social-National Party.” Its logo at the time resembled a swastika. Svoboda denies that it is racist or Nazi, and Tyahnybok gives speeches that I think express love for Ukraine without being bigoted, but again and again I have seen and heard creepy people and disgusting words from those who attend Svoboda rallies. Maybe they are plants, maybe they are not, and maybe Svoboda itself is a plant in order to discredit the opposition. It seems that there are as many opinions on the subject as there are political commentators. All of this fits what we are discussing in

Figure 4.2 Leaders of the three main opposition parties in Ukraine singing the national anthem after signing their historic accord. From left to right they are Oleh Tyahnybok, Svoboda Party; Arsenyi Yatsenyuk; Batkivshyna Party; and Vitalyi Klitschko, Udar. In between these men, we can see other dignitaries wearing T-shirts in support of freeing former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko from prison.
this chapter: the convoluted, opaque, underhanded, and thuggish ways of politics in Ukraine, and what we call here “Soviet ways in post-Soviet days.”

The two factions went at one another on May 18, not just with words from their respective podiums, but also with the fists of young toughs. The newspapers referred to them as “hired athletes” and “hired thugs.” Exactly what transpired and who punched whom depends on who you ask, as the fights that broke out over the course of the day in various parts of central Kyiv are presented differently depending on the political leanings of the news source and the politics of people who claim to be eyewitnesses. The versions of police reports cannot be trusted either, as they are under the control of the Party of Regions. Thus, we note with some amusement that the official police estimates of the size of the crowds are 4,000 individuals at Rise Up, Ukraine! and, exactly ten times more, 40,000, at the rally of Regionnaires. This is the exact reverse of what the opposition has claimed: 40,000 at Rise Up, Ukraine! and 4,000 Regionnaires. I don’t know the exact numbers myself, but can certainly vouch for the fact that there were tens of thousands at the opposition rally, and that I hardly noticed the presence of Party of Regions supporters among the postrally crowds in central Kyiv. As claims and counterclaims about numbers sort themselves out, it begins to look like roughly equal-sized rallies for both sides, perhaps about 20,000 to 30,000 participants each.

What was not equal, it seems, was the marchers' motivation. There is no reason to think that any of the people who turned out for the three opposition parties did so for any reason other than conviction. They came voluntarily and were not paid for their participation. The judgment about the Regionnaires rally, however, is quite the opposite, as a great many participants were paid, others were promised to be paid but were not, and a great many others were public sector employees who were told to turn up as part of their jobs. Circumstantial evidence for the different motivations for the two groups is that many supporters of the opposition could be seen hanging around and socializing in central Kyiv for hours after the programming had ended, while the Regionnaires crowd seems to have simply disappeared. Also, there are verifiable news reports that for a time quite a few of the Regionnaires' participants blocked a street in protest after the rally had ended because they had not been paid the 100 hryvnia (a little more than US$12) that they were promised. Also, it is known that many Rise Up, Ukraine! participants were prevented from going to Kyiv for the rally by police who diverted buses of protestors and boarded trains to tell people to get off. This tactic has been used by the Party of Regions before, citing issues of public safety in making Kyiv inaccessible, and it is believed
to have kept many thousands of opposition protesters from reaching the city. There is often violence when this happens, vandalism to vehicles, and other forms of intimidation. A close friend from Mariupol, an industrial city on the Sea of Azov 16 hours away by train, was among many who were escorted from a train by police, only to see their seats to Kyiv taken by supporters of the Party of Regions.

Both rallies were covered by media and photographers, so there is plenty of reporting and many images of what transpired. There was an enormous police presence, including Berkut, a no-nonsense special unit of the militsia that is descended from the Soviet Union’s special OMON forces, in full riot gear. I managed to photograph units as they marshaled early that morning in the belowground pedestrian crossings at Independence Square, as well as some of the fighting that took place hours later, but I have no shot as fortuitous as the one that was captured by a photographer for the news magazine Ukrainskiy Tyzhden (Ukrainian Week) of the “athlete” Vadym Titushko. He is captured in a fighter’s stance seconds before he and about ten compatriots behind him attacked Kommersant news photographer Vlad Sodel and Channel 5 TV journalist Olha Snisartchuk and pummeled them bloody. The two had been photographing the gang in an attack on Svoboda party marchers. The photograph also shows a police officer standing calmly beside Titushko. It has become an icon of that day, documenting the entry of violent thugs into the political campaign and police inaction.

Thousands of photographs were taken that day and disseminated over the Internet. That is how Titushko was identified and how it was learned that he and his associates, as well as other violent gang members that could be identified that day, were working for the Party of Regions. Titushko and his gang came from a “sports club” named Budo in Bila Tserkva, a town outside Kyiv, and they were known “thugs for hire.” Other monikers for such sports clubs are “security agencies” and “fight clubs” (Mykhelson and Velychko, 2013). In addition to working for clients in politics, such “fists” also work for raiders who want to intimidate building occupants or business owners who will not make way, and for business interests seeking to move against competitors. At least one gang member has confirmed in an interview that he and others worked for the Party of Regions and that the orders came from the party’s parliamentarians (Ukrainian Week, May 20-30, 2013). Svoboda is also known to employ “athletes.” Their toughs made trouble

17 “Titushko” has since entered the colloquial Ukrainian vocabulary as a word meaning “thug for hire,” as in “Many titushkos (or titushky) were bussed in to cause trouble.”
on May 18 as well, and they sparred head to head with Regionnaire toughs. I have seen thugs from Svoboda engaged in violence at other events as well.

It is not a great leap to suggest that, as a whole, what transpired on May 18 was the start of what promises to be an extraordinarily hot election campaign, and that the fighting echoes what members of parliament do routinely in their own “fight club” (Chapter 3). Furthermore, there are political commentators who interpret the events of that day as evidence of a campaign by the Party of Regions to swing an election that they are likely to lose in their favor by unleashing banditry under the guise of a struggle against fascism. The Kyiv Post referred to the Regionnaires’ strategy as “playing a dangerous antifascist card” (May 19, 2013), while Ukrainian Week captioned its close-up cover photo of Titushko and his gang with the words “The fascists of the future will be called anti-fascists” (Ukrainian edition, May 20–30, 2013; International edition, June 2013).

The reason that May 18, 2013, might be a date for tomorrow’s history books is that it might be a turning point in Ukrainian history. If the united opposition succeeds in finding one candidate to win the election, the country could embark on a very different path from the one it is now following, specifically one with more democracy, more support for the Ukrainian language, and closer ties to Europe. There might even be a significant drop in corruption and a chance to enter the European Union. On the other hand, if Viktor Yanukovych succeeds in winning reelection in 2015, he and his party will be able to solidify their hold on the country and run it with an even tighter fist, like Vladimir Putin runs Russia. Ukraine would then be brought closer to Russia, perhaps even into the sort of post-Soviet union that Russia has been urging. The use of gangs in the campaign can either turn independent voters against the Party of Regions, or gain votes for the party by convincing voters that the opposition is a dangerous fascist alternative. The gangs could also intimidate voters to support the party in power. That would truly be “a Soviet way in post-Soviet days.” Unfortunately, my soundings of Ukrainian citizens, as well as the results of public opinion polls, say that regardless of who wins in 2015, not much will change for the better, as all politicians in Ukraine are cut from the same cloth and care first and foremost about themselves.

4.5 Heorhiy Ruslanovych Gongadze

That the worst of the old Soviet Union is not necessarily fully in the past is seen in the tragic story of independent journalist Heorhiy Ruslanovych
Gongadze. His life was ended in the crudest of ways: they cut off his head. Despite the passage of more than a dozen years, exactly who they among Ukraine's not-so-democratic post-Soviets are and precisely why the crime was committed is still not known. However, there is evidence that points at very high levels and it would not be a surprise to many Ukrainians if it were eventually proven that the order to kill this crusading citizen came from the then-president of the country himself. That is where suspicions and mounting evidence lead. Here is the story in a nutshell: it is Ukraine at its messiest.

Gongadze was 31 when he died. He was cofounder of a website Ukrayinska Pravda (Ukrainian Truth) that disseminated news and opinions in opposition to the increasingly authoritarian administration of Leonid Kuchma, the second president of independent Ukraine. The website successfully sidestepped controls that the government was imposing on other media, and it was widely followed, especially because it exposed high-level corruption. Gongadze obviously got under someone’s skin. Soon after publishing a series of open letters about the nation’s lack of press freedoms and threats to himself and his family from the SBU, the Ukrainian secret police, he was kidnapped on September 16, 2000, and was never seen again alive. His decapitated body was found in a forest outside Kyiv some two months later. There is no sense in my going through all the details of what may or may not have happened in the case, as I have no information beyond what is available on the Internet to everyone. The important point, however, that underscores that Ukraine is excruciatingly far from heaven, is that the case did not stop with the arrest of four “pawns” from the intelligence surveillance unit of the Interior Ministry for the murder. Instead, suspicions via what has come to be known as the “Cassette Scandal” or “Kuchmagate” continue to point high: to President Kuchma himself, to his chief of staff at the time, Volodymyr Lytvyn, and to Kuchma’s Minister of the Interior, that is, the boss of the pawns, Yuriy Kravchenko. Kravchenko was found dead on March 4, 2005, in his luxurious dacha in the Kyiv suburb of Koncha-Zaspa from two gunshot wounds that may or may not have been self-inflicted; while on March 24, 2011, Kuchma was officially and inexplicably charged with unspecified involvement in the murder, an act that some critics see as a public relations stunt by Ukraine’s president, Viktor Yanukovych of the Party of Regions, to draw attention away from mess that is the rest of his country, or as crude retribution by Yanukovych for political disloyalty in the past on the part of the former president. Lytvyn, meanwhile, has ascended to be the speaker of the parliament.

The killing of Gongadze outraged the nation, which in turn helped to elect an opposition politician, Viktor Yushchenko, as Ukraine’s third president.
His was the “Orange Revolution” campaign of the winter of 2004-2005, the time when Ukrainian voices were the loudest in recent history. He was the candidate whose face was famously disfigured by poison during the campaign. That is still another unsolved crime. There are those who suspect Yushchenko’s political opponents at the time, including by name today’s president Viktor Yanukovych, and/or machinations in Moscow, but there are also many who suspect that the poison, allegedly dioxin, was self-administered in order to gain voters’ sympathies. A blood sample taken from Yushchenko in 2005 has mysteriously disappeared, and the former president has since declined requests for a fresh sample (traces of dioxin stay in the blood forever, apparently), saying that he wants to put an end to that chapter of his life. His health has since improved. Whatever is the truth, it is ugly. All of this is context for understanding the mess that takes place in Kyiv.

4.6 A Personal Warning?

It is hard to imagine that my work about Kyiv would attract the attention of security authorities in Ukraine, but it is indeed possible that it may have. That, too, would provide a context for understanding the situation in today’s Kyiv. I think that I have a lot to say about understanding the situation in today’s Kyiv. I think that I have a lot to say about what is going on in the city and about how good people suffer as a result, but there are no great exposés herein of official secrets or privileged details about corruption in high places or how oligarchs made their billions. Yet, it does seem that authorities might be interested in advance about what I might write, and that I have blipped onto their radar screens. If that is indeed the case, it would be because there are, in fact, huge secrets to protect in official Kyiv, and great fears that insiders’ income streams from corruption could be compromised by the results of brave investigative reporting. Many other writers, and not just Gongadze, but also newspaper reporters and university-based scholars, among others, have been “visited” by inquisitive government officials, so why not me?

My suspicions began to crystallize just four days before a planned departure from Kyiv. Quite a few people knew that I was leaving because I had been making a round of good-byes and thank-you visits to key informants and academic specialists who had been advising me. This included various friends and contacts who are well-known “Kyiv activists” and regulars at various protests and public demonstrations. I had been to dozens of “actions” over the months, knew quite a few of their key people, and was quite well
known by others in turn. Indeed, I had become accustomed to people introducing themselves to me at protests or at other venues such as academic roundtables on Kyiv topics, saying that they had heard that I was working on a book about the city and offering to share what information they knew. That is how some of the specific topics that I discuss here came to my attention. Mostly, the people who wanted to talk to me were fellow academics or activists affiliated with Kyiv-minded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or sometimes they were just ordinary citizens who thought that the demons who were undermining Kyiv needed wider exposure. But it was not until those last few days that I learned that, quite possibly, the police were also interested in me.

Four days before departure I received an email from a key informant/protestor-activist that I know especially well, telling me that someone named “Volodya” wanted to speak to me about my research and that I should call him. I did that immediately on instinct, trusting my friend and thinking that sometimes last-minute information can be the juiciest, and without asking any questions over the phone, agreed to meet the mysterious man the next day at a particular café. I had no idea what to expect. Volodya turned out to be a police official of middle rank who investigated official corruption. At least that is what he told me. He had heard from my friend “Oleg” that I was writing a book about demons in Kyiv, and he wanted to feed me a list of names of corrupt officials and to provide details about how money flows within a corrupt system. “I know where the money goes all the way to the top,” he told me, and offered to lay it out. “Wow, what a large proposition just three days before I am scheduled to leave!” I thought to myself. Images of Gongadze flashed through my head, as did those of a hallowed martyr in Putin’s repressive Russia, the much-beloved Anna (née Mazepa) Politkovskaya, an American-born Ukrainian woman who was a leading anti-corruption writer in Moscow until her gruesome assassination on October 7, 2006.

What would you do if you were in my position? I asked him why he was making me this offer and he said that he was frustrated that police work would not end the corruption, because the police force was itself corrupt, and that the problem needed to be made more public before there could be solutions. I asked why he was speaking to me specifically and not to someone else, and he said it that was because the topic is deadly dangerous both to him and to whichever writer reports on it, and I had more protection in being a foreigner than did local writers. That last point might be true, but my BS detector was already on full alert. What was his relationship to my trusted friend Oleg? Both Volodya and Oleg separately said the same:
they had met for the first time just two days earlier at a site where Oleg was making his own protests about goings-on in Kyiv, and Volodya started questioning him about the issues as an interested passerby. Oleg mentioned that I, an American, was writing a book that would include his own story, and Volodya asked to meet me.

So, here we are soon afterwards at a coffee shop in the center of Kyiv, and I have a proposal from a man who says that he is a police official who wants to give me confidential dirt about people high up. Again, what would you do? His topic is so enormous and I have only three days. I responded to him, suggesting that maybe he could find an investigative reporter who was a better fit for his information. I then quizzed him about police work, to focus the conversation more closely on topics that I am writing about and to assess his own statement that he really is a police officer. Asking for a badge or identification card would not have worked, because the conversation was, of course, on the QT, but I was able to establish that he knew police work well and that he knew personally what it was like to be on daily patrol in Kyiv. At my direction, he talked in detail about small-scale police corruption of the kind that I had seen many times, such as the shakedown of vendors and street musicians for cuts of their income, and about a particular crime – the beating by skinhead thugs of two dark-skinned foreign visitors – that had occurred about a month earlier not far from where we were. He spoke with authority and inside knowledge about these topics. Having passed my tests, he once more offered me the dirt. When I hesitated again, he asked me what was in my book if I was not interested in high-level corruption. In my reply, I focused on several of my central themes: today's pillaging of Kyiv by high-handed developers, environmental degradation, and the gaps in Kyiv society between the rich and the poor. He probed a bit, wished me well, and said, like other Ukrainian voices had said, that my book is much needed. As he doesn't know English, he wondered if it would be available in translation.

I will probably never know for sure what Volodya really wanted. Maybe, indeed, he was just a good citizen who was looking to expose corruption. Or, maybe as my instinct for self-preservation suggested, he was an agent of some sort who wanted to know in advance whether the book his bosses had heard about was going to cause any embarrassment for people who matter. It has not been too long since Ukraine had been a totalitarian police state with a prying security apparatus, so it would not be out of the question that there would be some official interest in what I was up to. Besides, it is said that the Yanukovych government was returning the country to Soviet-style policing and was proactively interfering with journalists' freedoms of investigation and expression, which also lends credibility to
the Volodya-as-agent interpretation. To my mind, it is fifty-fifty as to who Volodya was and what he wanted. I did save his telephone number and took his email address, and I promised to contact him if I found a writer who was better prepared for the kind of information that he offered.

There is one more detail. Oleg did not describe me to Volodya. I checked with him about that afterwards. Yet, when I entered the coffee shop about 3 minutes after our scheduled appointment time, Volodya smiled knowingly as I entered the establishment and waved me to his table. Maybe my body language gave me away as the person he was waiting for, or maybe he knew in advance what I looked like. I know for a fact that many times in the last months I was being photographed at protests and public meetings. Sometimes the camera was almost literally in my face as the photographer snapped, and other times I could see a long lens pointed at me from some distance. Police? SBU? Maybe, maybe not. I take my own photos of participants at public events for reasons of my own, so why should not journalists and other writers, and members of the public who think that I am interesting looking or irresistibly handsome take snaps of me? But we know that in Ukraine police and SBU attend meetings wherever there are unhappy citizens, and that they are accustomed to making inventories of those present, so we know pretty much for sure that somewhere along the line I, a frequent attendee at protests, entered onto their radar screens and needed to be accounted for.