Kyiv, Ukraine - Revised Edition

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Adrian Cybriwsky, Roman.
Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
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8  Landscapes of Struggle

8.1  The Killing of Oksana Makar

Oksana Makar lived a difficult life and, at age 18, died a horrible death.44 How she lived and how she died give insight to aspects of life among the poor in Ukraine, and perhaps also to special privileges enjoyed by the nonpoor. Put simply, this child of Ukrainian poverty and the social miseries that often accompany poverty had some questionable associations in her life, and in the end she was gang-raped by three young men and was then set afire and left to die. She survived for three weeks afterwards, but barely so, and then on March 29, 2012, succumbed to her horrible injuries. The next day she was buried in a wedding dress according to local tradition. The specific detail that these events took place not in Kyiv but about 480 kilometers (298 miles) away in the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv is not very important for us; Oksana’s story is a tragedy for all Ukraine, reflects the country as a whole, and may be a wake-up call in many respects about how to make the country better. I choose to tell this story also because it is very recent, and because Ukraine is talking about it, perhaps anxious to understand and learn.

Where to begin about Makar? Mykolaiv is a tough industrial city of about 500,000 known for shipbuilding and other heavy industry. It has not done well since the demise of the Soviet military machine that kept its factories busy and has offered its young citizens few prospects for a good life. Many of the most ambitious young people have left, either to go to Kyiv or other large Ukrainian cities, or just as often to seek work abroad. Others have fallen into poverty and some of the social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse that are often associated with economic hardship. The city’s population has been declining in step with economic problems and outmigration. Oksana Makar was born into such a setting in 1993, two years after Ukraine’s independence. She spent a lot of her childhood in an orphanage because her father was imprisoned for trafficking in narcotics and her mother for robbery. She completed only six years of schooling because she often ran away from the orphanage and was therefore not particularly employable as she approached adulthood. She had brushes with the law, including at

44  There are many Internet sources about this case, including Rudenko (2012) and Tomlinson et al. (2012).
least one arrest for prostitution. She probably ran with a tough crowd who were also from the underside of society in a poor city.

On the night of March 8-9, 2012, Oksana Makar was at a Mykolaiv pub called Rybka (a *rybka* is a small fish) where she met at least two of her attackers. She may have known one of the men before, although this has not been confirmed one way or another. Eventually, there were three men with her and she was in the apartment of one of them where she was severely beaten and then gang-raped. Her attackers apparently attempted to strangle her and then took her in an unconscious state to a construction site where they tried to hide what they had done by burning her. She was discovered by a passerby in the morning and taken to a hospital. There were burns on 55 percent of her body and her lungs were damaged from smoke inhalation. She was then transferred to a burn center in a hospital in Donetsk, where a she was operated on by a Swiss surgeon and had her right arm and both feet amputated to stop the spread of gangrene. It is worth pointing out that the cost of Makar’s medical attention was paid for by Party of Regions billionaire oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, a man mentioned in a different light in Chapter 6. Makar’s mother, Tatiana Surovitskaya, was with her during the hospitalization and at one point asked her daughter to describe her ordeal on video, which is now readily available online. The film runs for 1 minute and 19 seconds, and in it Makar tries to speak but either lacks the strength or decides not to continue after a few initial remarks. When asked what punishment should be meted out to her attackers, she said that they should have their balls ripped out and fed to dogs, and that she hoped that her attackers would be raped in prison (Antonova, 2012). Her mother has been criticized for making the video and posting it, as her daughter was in obvious pain and plainly was in no mood to speak. It is because Makar was filmed without her full and unequivocal agreement that I am not providing a link to the video.

Unfortunately, the attack on Makar was not an exception. It may have been more violent than most, but the instance of rape is high in Ukraine and violators often escape justice (Parfan, 2012). The country is still not far from the Dark Ages when it comes to protecting women from assault, both physical and verbal, and female victims are often treated as if it was their fault that they were unduly ogled, groped, or even raped. There is a culture among too wide a spectrum of Ukrainian society that believes that women are for sex, and that men who take sex are simply doing what is natural for men to do. It is that culture in which Makar’s attackers were almost certainly brought up, and when they got good and drunk in the company of a woman they had chatted up in a bar, they did what they did. All three
men were arrested soon after the incident. Two of them were released very quickly on bail, sparking rumors and news reports that they were politically connected. That turned out to be not true. Mykola Riabchuk, a journalist, author, and leading Ukrainian intellectual, has kept a personal log of violent crimes committed by Ukrainian VIPs and, especially, their offspring, and has written that although the rumors about the supposed high political status of Makar’s assailants proved to be unfounded, “[Ukrainian] people have become so accustomed to daily lawlessness and the rampant impunity of the strong and wealthy that they tend, naturally, to overreact” (Riabchuk, 2012, p. 1).

On November 27, 2012, all three assailants were convicted of rape and murder and were sentenced one by one by the Mykolaiv court to terms of 14 years, 15 years, and life in prison. What we know for sure is that Makar lived a hard life and that she did not deserve to die.

8.2 Faces of Poverty

We know as well that Oksana Makar and her gritty hometown of Mykolaiv are all too representative of Ukraine today. A country with outstanding agricultural and industrial resources is much too poor, and far too many suffer. There is a grossly unequal distribution of wealth (although one that is far from the world’s worst), and glaring reminders of Ukraine’s poverty are seen daily not only in worn industrial cities or remote villages, but also in the very center of Kyiv. Amid the Bentleys that bully the city, and just outside the perimeters of privilege protected by gates and guards in black, as well as outside the gates of gold-gilt churches, are many of the city’s poor. We see them one by one with paper cups begging for coins, poring methodically through trash cans for recyclables and food, asleep on benches in public squares, along sidewalks and in pedestrian undergrounds, or simply sitting alone with worn shopping bags overfilled with whatever possessions they have.\(^45\) Nationally, the percentage of people living in poverty has been measured as high as 35 percent, the highest rate in Europe except for the 35.8 percent living below the poverty line in Armenia.\(^46\) Of 157 countries

\(^{45}\) For an excellent study of begging in St. Petersburg, see Scattone (2010). The book in which this essay appears (Gdaniec, ed., 2010) contains several chapters that present research from Moscow and/or St. Petersburg that parallel my own observations about Kyiv.

\(^{46}\) Rankings and data vary somewhat according to source. Here, I am citing Index Mundi, a source that uses data from the CIA World Factbook: http://www.indexmundi.com/g/r.aspx?c=up&v=69.
that are ranked by Index Mundi, Ukraine is 56th in terms of percentage of population living below the poverty line, squeezed between Guyana (55th) and Paraguay (57th). Life expectancy at birth is 68.74, the second-lowest in Europe after Russia (66.4). The country ranks 152nd on this indicator out of 220 nations ranked by Index Mundi, just below Bangladesh, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, North Korea, and Turkmenistan, in descending order, and marginally better than Mongolia and Belize, 153rd and 154th, respectively. Furthermore, Ukraine has high rates of alcoholism, drug addiction, HIV-AIDS, and other afflictions, again among the worst in Europe and on a par with many developing countries. In addition, there are tens of thousands of “social orphans” in Ukraine, abandoned by their parents because they were born ill or deformed, or because the parents were impoverished, addicted to drugs or alcohol, or imprisoned. The country’s orphanages are notoriously overcrowded and are often poor and depressing. Many children escape, preferring life on the streets where, all too often, they turn to drugs, alcoholism, crime, and prostitution. As we said at the start, Ukraine’s citizens with options, such as my students who have graduated, prefer to move abroad, leaving behind a population that is disproportionately poor and poorly equipped for the future.

When I told Olena Zhelesko, the colorful street poet-protestor introduced in Chapter 1, that I was working on a book about the city, she advised me to go early on any morning to the Vokzal, Kyiv’s central passenger rail station, to view the rhythms of activity and talk with people. I told her that I had been doing that already, because I knew from my travels that such a setting was geographical nexus between the countryside of a struggling nation and the possible promise of a better life in the nation’s capital. Whether we are in Jakarta, Phnom Penh, or Vientiane in Southeast Asia, or Buenos Aires or Lima in South America, all capital cities in which I have observed the arrival of rural migrants up close, or in Kyiv, the rhythms at key passenger rail stations, inter-urban bus depots, and bridge crossings connecting countryside and city are all more or less the same: hopeful migrants from those provinces where there is no work arrive in the city risking what little they have in quest of a job, some seasonal work, or the chance to sell at a fair markup to a city market whatever it is that they brought with them from home. They are often greeted by someone with a need for their labor, as well as by an array of aggressive agents, touts, and operators who pull them this way and that with promises about income, an inexpensive place to live, and other opportunities. Often the migrants and sometimes those who await

them are keen for conversation, and almost always the conversations add up to the sounds of a nation’s struggles.

Kyiv’s vokzal is located in the center of the city in Solom’yanaskiy Raion (ward) near Vokzalna Station of the Red Line of Kyiv’s subway system. Its 16 rail tracks follow the valley of the small river Lybid, now invisible in the city except for underground pipes that channel its waters. The station is formally named Kyiv-Pasazhyr’skiy (Kyiv Passenger Station), which is what it says on tickets, but everyone calls it simply Vokzal, an abbreviated and fused word that means railroad building. It reads “VOKZAL” in bold Ukrainian and/or Russian letters affixed high atop the main building above the entrance (the word is written the same in both languages). The main building is imposing enough, although it is not one of the greatest and most beautiful in Europe, and was built in the late 1920s and early 1930s in a style that is said to be Ukrainian baroque mixed with constructivism. Vokzal is actually a sprawling complex that includes a second big entrance on the opposite of the main station building, the so-called Southern Station, as well as the Vokzalna Metro Station, and the various tunnels, underground passageways, and above-track skywalks that bind it all together. In front of the main building is a large public square that is called Vokzalna Ploshcha (Vokzalna Square) where licensed taxis, pirate taxis, minibuses, and larger buses await passengers, and where new arrivals in Kyiv begin their search for where to go and what to do. Adjacent to the square is a crowded McDonald’s restaurant, reported to be the third-busiest in the world, with 2 million orders sold in 2010, and an unrelated outlet of the Ukrainian fast-food chain McFoxy that makes its living by catching spillover from neighboring golden arches. A March 11, 2011, article in the Kyiv Post pictured the two together in a feature article about brand piracy under the headline “Faking It with Impunity Is Way of Doing Business” (Panova, 2011).

Olena Zhelesko urged me to mix and mingle in this landscape, and I did. Vokzal hums all day and all night, as there are commuter trains that pass through, Kyiv-area intra-urban lines, and longer routes that reach distant cities in Ukraine and cities outside the country such as Minsk, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. The hours near dawn, however, seem busiest and most interesting, as it is then when trains from the corners of Ukraine tend to arrive. Passengers of all ranks spill out, including business travelers, students on the move between home and campus, and Ukrainians coming to town for reasons such as business visits to government offices, specialized shopping, medical treatment, transfer to the international airport, and planned protest rallies. There are also migrants from rural areas who come to the capital to search for work, if not to start a new life. Such migrants
also arrive by bus, which is cheaper, and are often dropped at Vokzal, which also acts a terminal for bus routes. It is they who linger near Vokzal Square to find what is next. Especially in summer, they have that weathered look of people who have worked in the fields or outdoors in construction. They look strong (Figure 8.1). There are also Kyivans who make a living off the arriving passengers: bus and taxi drivers, food and drink vendors, apartment and rooming house agents, labor recruiters, and others. There are also bag thieves and pickpockets. And, finally, there are the destitute: those who ran out of money and hope, and are begging for fare to get back home; those who arrived without money and are begging for a handout to get them through the next day; those who have been robbed or cheated in Kyiv and have nowhere to turn; and those who simply pretend to be in any or all of these unfortunate circumstances.

People who are struggling seem to be everywhere in Kyiv. They are camped on benches in public squares and along main streets, work as petty vendors in pedestrian underpasses and on their stairways, and live in back lots, in derelict houses, and other hidden spaces. Away from the center, there are even more poor people, although densities might be lower. There are districts with low rents and poor-quality housing, inexpensive apartments

Figure 8.1  Laborers gathered around a recruiter for day work outside Kyiv’s central rail station
that get overcrowded, and a maze of exurban villages and other settlements where almost no one seems to have any money. There are people who live in the city’s parks along the river, even year-round in this four-season climate, and in the forests at the urban edge. Some are homeless loners, but quite a few others, such as ethnic Roma, have established camps along dirt trails in the forests outside the city and live in communities of a hundred or more. Many of the most desperate people suffer from alcoholism, mental illness, or physical ailments such as lost limbs. Some are panhandlers and beg for a living while others sift through trash bins or roam the streets in search of bottles and cans. On several occasions on Maidan Nezalezhnosti I was moved to see bottle collectors working furiously in competition with one another to put as much as they could into their various bags after a crowded concert or some other event had broken up and the people begin to disperse. There are also those who sing or play musical instruments for tips at Metro stations, along sidewalks, and in pedestrian underpasses, as well those who hand out advertising leaflets to passing crowds about sales at nearby stores, tasty fare at nearby restaurants, information about car insurance or driving lessons, and advertisements for everything from the services offered by Internet or mobile phone providers to discounts on new windows for drafty apartments. Some workers become human signboards and wander amid the crowds along sidewalks and near Metro stations as mobile advertisements for pawn shops, international marriage agencies, nearby stores that have sales going on and nearby restaurants with empty tables, schools of English language, and other businesses. Once I thanked an older woman in English who was wearing a front-and-back signboard for an English school and who handed me a leaflet for classes, but she had no idea what I said. Another memory is of a very old woman, at least in her mid-80s and small and frail-looking as can be, pacing outside a Metro station in a residential district as a signboard advertising an automobile driving school. There are a hundred or more such occupations; no one enters them by plan or choice – it is always a matter of poverty and necessity.

My notes have many entries along these lines. For example, there is Volodya, a second person with this name in this book, whom I met on a Khreshchatyk walkway where he worked by weighing people on a bathroom scale for tips. He had called out to me with a question about where I was from after seeing me pass by again and again over a period of weeks and said that he had noticed that I was both a regular in the area and, by looks, a foreigner. He spoke in Ukrainian and was very polite. A conversation ensued, the first of many that we had over a period of months. Volodya 2 was just 18. He had recently “been graduated” from living
in an orphanage in the Volyn region of Ukraine, and having nowhere to go, came to the capital to start a life. He was slight and did not look the type for construction work or other labor, and he may also have had some deficiencies upstairs. Nevertheless, he was nice, friendly, and open, and he seemed honest. I took a liking to him. He had bought the bathroom scale at a flea market and had entered the “weighing occupation” in order to support himself. He kept regular hours at a spot that he had selected for himself near an older woman who sold cigarettes, who was also pleasant and poor, and simply waited for customers to step on the scale. He quoted no prices, as he worked for tips, and was sometimes cheated by kids in his age group who did not pay and who made fun of him. Every day at 7:00 p.m. on the dot, he packed up his business and headed to a side street where he caught a marshrutka that took him to near the rooming house beyond Kyiv’s limits where he stayed. By 11:00 a.m. the next morning, he had commuted back to work. After I bought him a nice digital scale, he said that his business picked up.

Another example concerns the various furry animals, Bart Simpsons, and Sponge Bobs that I mentioned earlier in this book. They work Maidan Nezalezhnosti and Khreshchatyk for tips from tourists with whom they pose for photographs. They are much too aggressive and are annoying because they pester passersby and sometimes don’t easily take no for answer. However, another perspective is that these creatures are hard at work at low-paying jobs that they themselves despise. Quite a few of the dozen or so who work the central square at a time are only teenagers, aged perhaps 16 or so. As “Tiger” and other animals told me when on break with their tops off, it is unbearably hot in the synthetic fabric costumes that they are made to wear, especially so during the heat wave of summer 2012, but their breaks are short and few, and they are carefully measured. A boss watches continually from a central vantage place and complains if they are not aggressive enough in chasing after possible tippers. At the end of the day, each gives him the money he or she has collected and is then paid a cut that is supposed to be proportionate with how hard the boss thinks they worked. They then file off to a nearby apartment where they change to their own clothes and leave the costumes behind. Earning 100 hryvnia (about US$12.50) is a good day, but on many days the pay is half that amount. “Why do you put up with such work?” I ask. “Have you got a better job for me?” is the reply. When I complain on the street about being pestered yet again by some furry creature who proposes to pose with me for a photo I do not need, the response is sometimes a plea: “I don’t want to do this either. Don’t you know how hard it is to earn some money?”
Next is “Svetlana,” an 84-year-old taxi driver, the first female cabbie that I encountered in Kyiv. I entered her taxi for the first time for a ride from Pecherska Lavra to my home in the center in a sudden rainstorm after the first two cabs I tried wanted exorbitant sums for the short distance. However, when I asked at the window of a hulky, ancient white Volga with a cracked windshield, Svetlana said that the fare was a very reasonable 40 hryvnia (US$5), so I hopped in. The cab was not only ancient, but the driver looked old, too, and her dashboard was a world of icons and holy cards that also suggested the past much more than the present. She told me that she had been working as a cabbie for 40 years and that when she started, she was Kyiv’s first female taxi driver ever. She was not welcomed into the profession and is still not particularly welcome among male drivers, if only because of her pricing. It was a much easier job than the farm work she had done as a young woman, she explained, and was now her means of supplementing an inadequate pension. I watched nervously as she drove very slowly, shifted gears very slowly, and made choices about turns and lane changes very slowly, so I asked how old she was. When she said 84, she added that she could not afford to stop working because of the rising cost of living. Her personal needs were not great, she said, except to top off a pension, so her prices were what prices should be rather than extortionate. I rode with her several times since, always slowly and always knowing in advance where she might be parked, and then one day she was gone. It has been more than a year since I have seen Svetlana, so I assume that she is no longer driving and may not even be with us. She had told me that she expected to drive until the end.

There are many other elderly people who could or should be enjoying a restful retirement except for economic circumstances that force them back to work. A disproportionate number are women who have outlived their husbands and are impoverished in widowhood. For everyone, pension payments are small and do not keep pace with rising prices. Some old folks have been abandoned by children who are themselves poor or have moved abroad, while others work because their children or grandchildren have needs. In a culture where hard work is the norm, at least among those with rural roots as opposed to those from urban proletarian occupations, we see older women as petty vendors of everything from cigarettes by the smoke to lottery tickets to small bouquets of wildflowers to cups of fresh raspberries or other seasonal fruit. Sometimes in the morning, we encounter sellers struggling with bulky bags of wares as they board crowded trolley buses or subway cars during the morning rush. Often, no one seems to see them and no one offers to help, even to the slightest of old ladies with the biggest bags, or to the most overweight babushka who can barely lift herself onto the bus, much
less her goods. I break rules of social-scientific participant-observation and intervene when I can. Older women also comprise much of the workforce as eyes in the corners of rooms in museums, the eyes on escalators in the Metro system, and as the city’s army of gardeners, leafrakers, street sweepers, and custodians of public toilets. They work silently with dignity and with little interaction with the public, and are often regarded as if they were invisible.

One particular incident was especially eye-opening. I was about to move from one apartment to another in Kyiv and decided to give away various household goods and refrigerator contents that I did not want to lug. I put them into a beat-up wheeled suitcase that I no longer wanted either, and then pulled it behind me into the courtyard of a nearby abandoned building where I knew that homeless people were living as squatters. It was well after dark when I arrived because my packing had taken a long time, but I knew the layout of the place from an earlier photo excursion and managed to penetrate quite deeply into the complex with little light. The sound of the rolling suitcase got residents’ attention and I was greeted by an older woman who was the first to emerge from the ruin. She gave me the once-over, welcomed me, and began to offer a place to live. I should have known better. When I explained my intentions, she was shocked, and then asked me a question that shocked me in return: “You know that we are bums, don’t you?” She had most likely detected from my speech that I was a foreigner, and wanted to make sure that I knew where I was. She used the word bomzhi, which does indeed translate as “bums.” That is what society thinks of her and her neighbors, and it was simply not conceivable to her that someone from the outside, whether foreigner or fellow citizen, would be giving them things. “Yes, I know that that is what they call you,” I said, “but these are things that I no longer need and I thought that you might have a use for them. There are some perishable food items,” I added, “but they are fresh from the refrigerator and still cold. If you eat them soon, it will be alright.”

I am too embarrassed to elaborate on the great thanks and prayers to God that gushed forth. I came back a little later with a second load, and this time there was a handful of well-wishers and thankful “bums” to greet me.

There are few “soup kitchens” and residential shelters to help such people in Kyiv or in other Ukrainian cities (although there might be marginally more in the west of the country than in other regions), so “bomzhi,” as they are called almost universally in the country, are more or less on their own.

48 For example, see the article about street children in the Ukrainian city of Makeiivka (Russian Makeevka, as in the article’s title) by Naterer and Gordina (2011); and the 2007 article about homeless construction workers by Anastasiya Ryabchuk.
When the notorious Leonid Chernovetskiy (Chapter 3) was mayor (2006-2012), he initiated some programs to help the homeless as part of his populist platform, but that was early in his term of office and the programs withered away before long. Where there is help, it is often the work of churches or other religious organizations such as the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations mega-church of which Chernovetskiy was a prominent member and some, but not nearly all, Catholic or Orthodox parishes.

In my own experience, I was privileged to visit an exceptional help center called Logos on several occasions and to get to know some of its key people. It is located in a forested area just outside the western municipal limits of Kyiv and is a “Christian center of spiritual renewal” that has transformed an old school building into a haven for neighbors in need. It operates a soup kitchen that feeds 45 to 50 poor people each day and a free medical clinic, and provides a very comfortable and nicely equipped shelter for people in need of a place to stay. Its facilities also are used for religious retreats. Father Nicoli Ilnytskyi, the young Ukrainian Orthodox priest who had dedicated himself to this project, has plans for additional programming and the expansion of its facilities, and is building a church nearby as well. Funds and materials are from donations, with a good fraction of the help coming from evangelical Christian churches in the United States. There are few such places in Ukraine, Father Nicoli explained, but the needs are enormous. I can testify that Logos’s “clients” are in disbelief, at least initially, that there is help for them without a catch. That is, you do not have to pray to eat, nor pay. Logos is in a “forgotten” part of the metropolitan area where poor people live as if in exile from the city. Housing conditions are poor, as are community services, and many neighbors reside, quite literally, as campers in the forests with no running water or other urban services.49

These kinds of experiences took place again and again. Wherever there was someone who was in need and who had caught my eye for whatever reason, when I offered help over and above a few coins or low denomination bills tossed into a cup, the response was disbelief that someone was being nice. Indeed, I found that some people mistrusted me for trying to be helpful and assumed that I must have ulterior motives or a scam up my sleeve. My foreignness is what sometimes got them to believe: that is, no one from their world would pay them any mind and only an outsider could be so kind. For example, there was a man about my age (60s) who was wandering in the underground corridors of Khreshchatyk Metro Station. He was carrying seven sizable plastic shopping bags filled with belongings in his hands and

49 The website of Logos is http://www.kiev-logoscenter.org/.
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a bulging old backpack on his back. His jeans were torn, his shirt was dirty, and he looked very tired. I watched from a distance as he walked back and forth, put his bags down, read some ads on posters in detail, picked his bags up again, and wandered in circles a little more. “You look like you might be lost,” I said. “Can I help you?” “I am not lost” was the blunt reply. “Well maybe there is something else that you need? Are you alright?” “I am fine. I do not need anything.” I looked at him for a moment, and then said bluntly: “Maybe you need some money?” “Money? For free? Of course. Who would say no?” I handed him 200 hryvnia that I had prepared for the moment (only about US$25, but to him a substantial sum) and walked away to a barely audible “Thank you.” I then watched him from a distance from behind a post as he examined the two 100 hryvnia notes again and again. He finally folded them into an envelope and put them deeply into a pocket. I knew that he was aware of me, and I turned my back. Within a moment he was there beside me: “You are Polish, right? You are not one of us. You sound like you are Polish.” A conversation ensued, but I kept it short, as I did not want to make him explain his poverty. He was from the south of Ukraine and had studied in Moscow where he became an engineer. He worked on “Soviet rockets and stuff,” he said, and had lived all over the Soviet Union, especially in remote launch and research sites, but now there was a new world. What was past no longer matters, he continued, and no one cares who he is or what he had done. “What do you do now? I asked. “I am in transition,” he said. “It is a time of transition.” I took the next subway train as it came by, and he presumably has gone to wherever the transition is taking him.50

I have many photographs of people who struggle: not this gentleman with his bags, but ice-breaking babushkas, street-side beggars, dispensers of toilet paper, sellers of flowers, and weighers of passersby, among others, but they are all sad photographs and are mostly not for show. The looks on some faces remind me of the faces in Ilia Repin’s Barge Haulers on the Volga, a famous painting from 1870-1873 showing “Volga Boatmen” pulling a ship up Russia’s great river. Printing a photograph of an old woman or someone else who is struggling through life might be another form of exploitation, although the situation is so common in Kyiv that not showing it would constitute an omission. Likewise, I also have photos of charlatan beggars, but it is not my function to expose them. I wish that I had a photograph of Svetlana at the wheel of her cab, if only for myself, but I never got up the nerve to ask if she minded, so there are no pictures of her. That was a mistake. However,

50 For a wider study of social costs of postsocialist transition in Ukraine and Russia, see Round and Williams (2010).
there is Misha, a middle-aged man I met one day during one of my long walks through Kyiv. He did not mind posing and gave permission when I explained that I was a book author-professor. I had met him at the edge of the Svyatoshyn neighborhood, a residential area in the western part of the Right Bank, where he was at work in the fairly sizable yard of an older single home cutting branches off trees that had been felled. The property was fenced in but the house looked like no one had lived there for a long time. I took an initial photo from a distance and then when he looked my way, I approached him and we talked from opposite sides of the fence.

No, it was not his house, Misha explained with a laugh; he was just a handyman who had been picked for this job from among other hopefuls that morning at Vokzal. He has worked at hundreds of odd jobs all over Ukraine and in Russia, and has just arrived in Kyiv once again from his home village in Poltava oblast, where he also works on the family farm. There was less to do there at this time and always a need for money, so he was on one of his many ventures into the capital to earn some cash. This task will take another two days, he said, and because the weather is good, he might decide to simply sleep on the grounds where he was working. He does not know the area nor who owns the land he was on, but was driven to the site by the labor recruiter who recognized him from an earlier gig. He had been handed a small chain saw and other equipment, and his job was to cut limbs and branches into smaller pieces, and to stack them. We surmised together from the setting that it was all coming down to continue the expansion of urbanization in the district, and that he was doing clean up after the tree-cutters had taken down some monsters before other machines would come in to remove stumps. I did not ask how much he would be paid, but he said that it was good work and that he was pleased with it. Other
work is downright dangerous, he said. Removing branches from a downed tree is far better than cleaning up chemicals on the sly as some jobs offer, or work at some construction or demolition sites. I mentioned that I had once seen a construction site where the workers came out at the end of the day covered head to toe in some sort of dust, and that they looked to be only teenagers. “Take buvaye” (“Such things happen”), he said with a nod. Before I left, I took some photos of Misha in the setting in which he worked and decided to use one of them here to finish this section with something more upbeat (Figure 8.2).

8.3 Petty Traders

There is hard work and little pay as well in petty trade, another occupation in which we see Kyivans of all ages struggling to make a living. There are vendors at pretty much every venue where the public gathers or passes: the central train station, Metro stations, bus and marshrutka (minibus) stops, pedestrian crossings and underpasses, busy sidewalks, the fronts of

Figure 8.3 One of the countless petty vendors in Kyiv, a great many of whom are elderly women
shopping centers, supermarkets, and other stores, as well as at the gates of churches, in popular squares, parks, and beaches, and at events such as concerts, fireworks displays, political rallies, and sports competitions. What is sold is just about everything a person could have a use for that can be carried or consumed. You won’t normally buy a double-door refrigerator or a sofa bed from a petty vendor at street side, but there are cigarettes by the pack and the single smoke, as well as fresh vegetables and eggs, prepared foods, chocolate bars, drinks, lottery tickets, flowers, minutes and cases for your mobile phone, batteries, newspapers, shoes, socks, sunglasses, sunblocks, shampoos, shopping bags, scouring pads, scissors, stockings, and bras, among countless other items (Figure 8.3).

There is an important distinction between those petty traders who work for themselves and those who have bosses who assign them to spots for which they had previously or concurrently arranged with authorities. The former are always in danger of being shaken down or chased by police, and are sometimes victims of such actions several times in a day from different locations, while the latter work for a pittance for a business owner who keeps a sizable chunk of the proceeds and also pays off police who decide which businesses go and which stay. At the end of the day, employee-vendors need to square proceeds with inventory and are personally responsible for any shortfalls. Quite a few business owners operate multiple kiosks such as for drinks, ice cream, or newspapers and magazines in various parts of the city that are duly licensed and pay taxes, and they pay their employees an hourly wage. Small motorized “barista” vans that brew espressos and other kinds of coffee are increasingly common in off-street locations. As they expand their businesses to new locations, kiosk operators often put pressure on competitors who lack official protection, and have them chased away. Kiosks, in turn, can be the scourge of store and shopping mall operators who oppose the competition out front and employ their political pull to free up the sidewalks from so-called MAFs (mali arkhytekturny formy [small architectural forms], as they are officially classified). From time to time, one sees or reads about anti-vendor and anti-MAF campaigns in Kyiv to rationalize business and provide more space on sidewalks for pedestrians and cars (Krasnohorodsky, 2012). Thus, there is a game of musical chairs of sorts in Kyiv in which bigger businesses with better connections exert pressure on smaller businesses in contested territories, and where the ultimate losers are the smallest and pettiest of self-employed entrepreneurs who have no one to turn to and lack the proceeds with which to buy administrative support. They are chased around Kyiv and stay in poverty. As in other cities around the world, especially in developing countries, many of the vendors
are young people who are striving to build lives, but in Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine the ranks of street vendors also include countless elderly people who are struggling to continue lives.

My notes contain countless references to vendors. One day I stepped out from Zoloti Vorota Metro Station and saw a middle-aged woman selling nice quality plush animals. There was a frog that I liked as a gift for someone I would see soon, so I negotiated a price and said that I would return in a few minutes because I was plumb out of cash and needed to go to a bank machine. She told me to hurry because she expected the police to chase her away at any minute, and told me where to look for her if she were gone. Sure enough, ten minutes later, she was no longer there but was down the block and around the corner looking for me to come back. It is a daily, day-long routine for her, she said, and she did not think that it was right to pay the police for a place to stand. Another example concerns street musicians. Some seem to have a given hour or two that is theirs day after day at a given spot, after which they move on to another place. Their “permits” seem to work this way. Others apparently are almost literally forced to share the take. I remember listening to two students of violin performing at a Metro station entrance and then seeing the two police officers on patrol look hungrily into the violin case with coins and small bills. The two of them stayed put a few feet to the side of the musicians to watch as donations accumulated. I left before the “take” was executed because I sensed that I had become an object of interest, too, but when I saw the same musicians the next day and made a respectable donation, I asked them about the day before. “Yes, of course, what do you think? Everyone wants theirs,” was their answer to my question about whether the police had taken a share of their proceeds. The amount that police expect to be paid varies with how lucrative a business seems to be, and there are many cases where the police are corrupt za kopiinky (for small change) only. I have also heard that at least in some precincts, members of the rank-and-file police are given quotas with respect to how much money to bring in from such shakedowns, and that the money works its way up a chain of power. The police, in turn, might solve disputes between competing traders or musicians and assign one to a better spot and another to a place further away, depending on the price they get for their services.

Among the new “small businesses” that have appeared this year (2013) along Khreshchatyk and other busy parts of the city is a game to challenge your strength: pay 20 hryvnia (about US$2.50) to play and you can win ten times that amount – simply hang for two minutes from a horizontal bar above your head without letting your feet touch the ground. It sounds easy
for those in shape, but no one ever wins; very few make it to the 60-second mark. The best that I have seen was someone who came within six seconds of being a winner. The bar is simply rigged: it is not fixed but turns to work hard against you, and makes something that looks easy at first to be nigh impossible. Every day there are several of these games in operation along the 1-kilometer length of Khreshchatyk, and every day their operators find young male after young male who tries the challenge and fails. Perhaps some of the takers are naïve “country bumpkins” who have recently arrived in the capital. Business picks up with nightfall and increased alcohol consumption; the concessionaire makes good money to be sure.

I tell this story because I have seen how the police want their cut of this action, too. One sunny Saturday afternoon I see that there are two horizontal bar devices and their unhappy operators “imprisoned” behind a traffic control barricade off Khreshchatyk alongside the post office building. At first, three police officers are standing guard and then there are five. I decide to play dumb. I walk up, shoot a photograph, and turn to the policeman who looks to be in charge (conversation in Ukrainian):

Me: What’s going on here? Why are these men being held? I see these gymnastics devices all over Kyiv.
Police: We are waiting for them to produce permits for their games.
Me: You need a permit?
Police: Of course. What business is it of yours?
Me: I am not from here. I see these games everywhere. I am simply interested in your system. I am surprised that you need a permit. If I wanted to make a living on Khreshchatyk, would I need to get a permit?
Police: You know the answer full well. Why are you asking?
Me: Why are you smiling?
Police: Because I know that you know the answer full well.
Me: How does one get a permit?
Police: It’s on the Internet. Go to the site of the City of Kyiv.
Me: It must be a serious thing, this permit. There are five police officers here guarding these two men and their two devices. That’s a lot!
Police: (Just laughter)
Me: Once when I was in Cambodia I saw something that looked like this. Only it was not about a permit. It was about paying bribes to the police. I am glad that it is different here.
Police: (Now laughing loudly) Yes, this is not Cambodia. But I think that you know where you are.

Me: I am just a foreigner, so I did not know about the permit system.

Police: Yes, we have a permit system.

I then questioned him a bit more about “permits” for vendors, street musicians, and others. Another of the police officers had edged closer to listen in. As I spoke, I put the word for permit (pozvolenya) into finger quotes. He tried to get away by pretending that his phone had rung, but he knew to be polite to me. At one point, he even laughed at himself, after making the absurd comment that the reason for the protective barrier was to provide safety from any automobiles that might drive past. We both knew that we were standing well back from the street, against a building and behind a portico, and that on that day Khreshchatyk was a pedestrian zone that was closed to motor vehicles. I needed to be polite to him, too, as I was vulnerable at that particular time in not having my passport on me, so I thanked him for his time and disappeared into the crowd. But I kept watching. Someone came to one of the “imprisoned” game operators and handed him something. That person then signaled the police officer I had spoken to and the two of them stepped outside the perimeter for about 30 seconds, during which time he handed something to the police officer. It must have been the “permit,” because the barricade was moved aside, the five police officers left, and the two released prisoners reclaimed their devices and returned to Khreshchatyk. I would not tell you this story if I did not know that it was an everyday occurrence.

In the same vein, I remember seeing a lineup of 10 to 15 elderly men and women vendors who would come regularly to sell clothing and various household items along a busy one-way subway pedestrian concourse that I used regularly when commuting to work in the mornings. They stood several feet apart on the same side of the walkway, and whenever one of them at the end saw police approaching, everyone would pack up instantly on signal and the entire group would disappear into the crowds. Their wares included women’s clothing items such as sweaters or blouses on hangers, stockings and bras, and doodads for hair, as well as small mirrors, kitchen tools, and various toiletries. Every time I walked past as part of the commuting throng, I wonder who would buy a bra at such a time and place, and I never actually saw such a sale occur. I also wondered who among the morning commuters would step out of the moving tide to pick up a hand mirror or a vegetable grater on the way to work. Yet, the sellers returned day after
day. On the days when I did not see them, I assumed that they had already been chased, and on the days when they were there, I always noticed how observant they were to the ends of the concourse, looking for approaching police. Eventually, I accepted that the items they sell are normal for areas where commuters pass, both in underground walkways and outside under the open sky, including men's and women's undergarments. Not everyone can afford to shop at Victoria's Secret, I began to understand.

I have special respect for those who make a living on the subway itself. There is a dour army of sad-looking sales agents that moves from car to car at station stops in order to renew pitches for the products that are offered for sale. Others who work the subway cars break into song or play a musical instrument for tips. The products that are sold range from batteries to maps of Kyiv, magnifying glasses, plastic passport covers, driving test manuals, folding fans for the sweaty, as well as various toys and other gadgets. One man bounced a plastic ball as he walked through the subway car, showing how it lit up in many colors with each impact. When another vendor demonstrated a toy helicopter that lifted on spring power from his hand into the air, I imagined that he was President Yanukovych heading for his beloved helipad. There was, in fact, a physical resemblance, and I wanted to comment to the stranger next to me but held back. My respect for the subway vendors is because they work so hard, moving all day long from car to car and then speaking up without embarrassment from amid the standing passengers as soon as the doors close to begin the ride to the next station. In a matter of seconds, they recount the advantages of the product that they are selling, note the amazingly low price, and ask who would like to buy. They speak in Russian or Ukrainian (no apparent pattern) and try hard to make a sale or two in the short time between stops. They never look prosperous or upbeat, are typically middle-aged or older, and make me think that they must be desperate for any honest work to take jobs such as this. Usually no one buys, but when one person does, then others often follow.

One subway seller made a lasting impression. I refer to my notes from November 9, 2010. He was young, about 20-22, was not dour like the others, and began his sales pitch just as the train cars doors closed for the start of the ride. He was selling a simple peeling device for potatoes, carrots, etc., and was carrying a supply of vegetables in a large plastic bag that he had at his side. As he spoke, he pulled out a carrot and began to peel it, showing how well the device works. I thought that it was funny to see a carrot being peeled on the subway and had to hold back laughter. A woman to his back was laughing, too. But elsewhere, people were minding their own business, not really looking at him, noses buried in their books or mobile phone
screens, or looking dead ahead. Then in a flash he pulled out a cabbage and showed how well the device could make slaw. Carrot and cabbage parts flew into his bag. The price is only 20 hryvnia (about US$2.50), he said, and the device cannot be had in a store – not one this good. “Who wants one?” he asked? Soon we will be at the next station. To my surprise and to my admiration, in the next few seconds he sold five units to five different people. That’s 100 hryvnia (US$12.50) in 3 minutes or less. The car slows to a stop, the door opens, and he switches to the next car. I was impressed. Surely, so many people could not be in need of a slaw maker; I assumed that buyers were rewarding him for his energy and efforts.

Being exploited is the norm for petty vendors. Comparatively few are in business for themselves, as Volodya the bathroom scale master apparently is, and most, including the popular carrot guy, actually work for a boss. In a society rife with corruption, it is hard to be your own business, because if you actually start making money, the crooks will muscle in. So, like the rabbits and tigers who struggle to get a fair cut of the take at the end of the day from their handler, there are poor people everywhere who report to a boss who takes the lion’s share of proceeds. He, in turn, supplements the incomes of police officers on the beat from money that he does not pay his sellers, and some of that is passed upwards. Some bosses are big enough to live off the labors of not just a dozen teenagers in furry suits, but maybe dozens or hundreds of struggling underlings. The old lady who sells cigarettes by the pack or by the individual smoke from off an inverted cardboard box does not work for herself, but is one of many other such people who sit all day at some assigned crossroads of pedestrian traffic on behalf of some king of cigarettes who pays off authorities to monopolize that business. She needs to account for every cigarette with either money or unsold inventory. Once at about 11:00 p.m., I felt sorry for a stooped old woman selling flowers on the street, so I bought her entire inventory so that she at last could go home. What she did instead, I observed, was to go to a parked van not far away to take an even larger load of flowers from the flower boss, and then return right back to where she had been. Ice cream vendors also work for bosses (and are required to weigh ice cream as it is put into a cone), as do vendors of minutes for your mobile telephone, vendors of kvas (a popular nonalcoholic beverage made of fermented rye), and vendors of many other products. They are part of a chain that is “owned” by someone else. We conclude that once the nation worked for a screwed-up state; now many of its neediest citizens work for biznesmeny (businessmen) who screw them. The businessmen, in turn, are screwed by the foot soldiers of the state, the lowest police officers, whose job it is to collect the petty cash that accumulates and moves up and up the hierarchy.
8.4 The People’s Markets

Kyiv has had public markets since well before Soviet times, and then since the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of hard times for so many citizens, has seen the development of new markets where poor people work as vendors and other poor people shop for bargains. This pattern, too, is reminiscent of the Third World, and reflects a society with widening gaps between rich and poor and increasing spatial segregation. I call them people’s markets because for so many citizens in Kyiv, literally tens of thousands of them, they are a source of livelihood, and for many tens of thousands more are a source of necessities at lower prices. The words “informal markets” also apply, although not necessarily to all examples of such markets because some of them are officially sanctioned and are, therefore, not quite informal. Those markets are more accurately simply “public markets.” In Ukrainian, the word for market is ринок and the plural is ринки, and the words стихийний ринок are the closest translation for informal market. Many of the sanctioned markets are in dedicated structures with roofs and can, therefore, be called covered markets, kryttii rynky in Ukrainian.

There are various categories of people’s markets, including: (1) those that are located in covered market structures that were erected in Soviet times or even earlier; (2) informal spillover markets from those “official” public markets; (3) periodic farmers’ markets; (4) large, bazaarlike markets in residential zones and near Metro stations that have come under the private ownership of a landlord to whom vendors pay rent; (5) so-called sekond-hend (secondhand) markets that specialize in used clothing; (6) periodic flea markets; and (7) specialized markets such as the large market that sells both new and used books near the Petrovka Metro Station, and a pet market in the Kurenivka neighborhood that is named Ptychka after the sales of birds there. There is some overlap between these categories as well as differences within them, so this list of 1 to 7 is simply a rough guide.

As with the case of individual vendors, these markets are also vulnerable to displacement by redevelopment or other forces, and also face the additional costs of corruption and bribery from officials who insist on a piece of the proceeds, even if those proceeds are very small. In Kyiv, as I have seen as well in the Third World, people’s markets have a precarious existence. This applies to informal flea markets where poor Kyivans gather to sell some of their possessions in order to raise money, as well as to markets that are large, popular, well-established, and well-known. They can all be made to close when someone else wants the land, or when other retailers, for example, those who pay rent to a shopping mall, use
their influence to get rid of competition. Informal markets where the sellers refuse to leave have had a way of catching fire in Kyiv, much like in the case the flaming ghosts of Chapter 6, or have been shut by force by armed police.

As an example of how unstable it can be in Kyiv for business people at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, the popular Lukianivsky Market located in central Kyiv not far from heart of the city recently fell victim to raiders who simply took the place for themselves during an ownership dispute. Specifically, the market was reported to have been “seized” on May 20, 2012, by some 300 “unknown young people” who simply told the vendors to leave and then turned off the market’s utilities. Police are said to have looked the other way, and officials in City Hall were unresponsive except for words that sounded empty. A spokesman for stall operators explained it this way: “Raiders from Kvitkova Haliavyna Ltd. aren’t letting us work calmly – they’re threatening us by saying ‘get out of here, take your stuff away, we want to come and change the management.’ They don’t tell us what they want to do, they just want to seize it [the market)” (Interfax-Ukraine, 2012a). The land will almost certainly be put to other uses soon, perhaps even for construction of a “monster,” and the people who worked there are simply out of luck.

Some of Kyiv’s public markers were established decades ago in order to sell food products, and continued through Soviet times to supplement what was sold at government stores with products from private plots on collective farms and dacha allotments. With time, such markets expanded to include various black market and imported goods such as clothing and household items in addition to meat, fish, produce, bread, and dairy products. Some of the markets were in specially built structures for such trade and actually have a fairly long history, while others have a more spontaneous look to them, like a bazaar with narrow lanes and cubby holes for business. Perhaps the best known of Kyiv’s markets is the picturesque Bessarbskyi Market, popularly called “Bessarabka,” at the end of Kreshchhatyk across the street from “Bessarabian Lenin.” It predates the Soviet period and was constructed in 1910-1912 as a market for food that was brought in from the Russian czarist region of Bessarabia in the south of Ukraine. It still has a bit of an ethnic and regional flavor, as well as architectural charm from a century ago, and is a popular photo stop for tourists to the city. It is not an obvious “landscape of struggle,” although it may well be that many tenant-vendors do not make a strong living from their work, as rents are high and the potential numbers of shoppers has declined with changeover of the surrounding area from residential to commercial land uses.
Another landmark is the Zhytnyi Rynok (Rye Market) at the edge of Podil. Its origins are linked to a local historic church and monastery and go back several centuries, but the market now has a retro-Soviet look, as since 1980 it has been housed in a covered structure adorned on the outside with enormous socialist realist representations of historic scenes, landscapes, and famous faces from around Ukraine and the former USSR. The interior has orderly rows of vendor tables arranged by product type where shoppers can easily compare one seller’s cuts of meat or tomatoes to those offered by another, and an upper mezzanine level that specializes in the sale of clothing. Outside this market, the look is more chaotic, as still more sellers of food items, household goods, and other products have crowded as close as they can to the building, and compete with one another and against the sellers inside for customers. Here we do get images of struggle, as in the case of old women who sit apparently all day long offering no more for sale than a meager inventory of potatoes, radishes, or raspberries, etc. Sometimes they plead with passersby to make a purchase.

On Saturdays there are many more of these sellers, and they expand the marketplace to the walkways and grassy area between opposing lanes of traffic along the wide street Nizhnyi Val. This is an example of a “periodic market” in Kyiv, of which there are many. Such markets are open only on particular days of the week or month such as on Saturdays, on “third Saturdays,” or on every other Tuesday, along a designated street in a residential area or near a Metro stop. Neighbors know to schedule their purchasing accordingly. Such markets tend to specialize in fresh food, although other foods are sold as well, as are items of clothing and household goods. Many vendors follow a circuit of periodic markets, and sell their meat, eggs, honey, or inventory of socks or sunglasses at many locations over the course of a month. The vendors police themselves, if only informally, with respect to which vendor occupies which spot in the market and clean-up of the area at the end of the working day. “Tips” for local police are often managed centrally, that is, via a representative of the sellers as a group. Quite a few of these periodic markets have been at the same site on a regular basis for decades and seem stable. However, urban change and redevelopment have done away with others, or at least shifted them to new locations, and the possibility of market closure is always present. There is increasing upmarket redevelopment along Nizhnyi Val near Zhytnyi Rynok, and it would not be a surprise to see a reconfiguration of the outdoor market in the future if not outright closure. Such was the fate of a similar market called Sinnyi Rynok (Wheat Market) close to L’vivska Ploshcha (L’viv Square) near Kyiv’s center. In addition to sellers of vegetables, bread, meat, and shoes, among other
“basic” items, there was also a flea market with a reputation for unusual objects and a cast of Bohemian vendors, but the entire place was closed in 2004 and later demolished to make room for a new-style commercial center (Belorusets, 2010).

The situation is more precarious for other categories of markets. For instance, since the Soviet period, there has been an explosion of bazaars that specialize in sales of used clothing and other secondhand goods. They are popular with bargain hunters who look for just the right item, even a famous brand, at deeply discounted prices. Some of the goods originate as items that had been worn locally, but most of the inventory comes from abroad, and much of that had been donated by foreign charities with an interest in helping the poor. Foreign aid shipments, in turn, have a way of being hijacked by shady entrepreneurs who sell what they have taken instead of distributing it free, with the result that in cities and towns all over Ukraine (and in other poorer parts of Europe and other continents, too) there are booming “secondhand” markets where people know to go for used clothing in good condition and foreign cachet. In Kyiv, the biggest such markets have been at Shulyavska and Lisova (Figure 8.4). Both are names of Metro stations, with Shulyvaska being on the Right Bank near the huge Bilshovyk (Russian: Bolshevik) industrial complex that was once a key

Figure 8.4 A view of a table at the secondhand market at Shulyavska before the market was burned down
producer of machinery and armaments for the Soviet military, and Lisova
on the Left Bank in a district where the expansive apartment complexes of
the 1970s and 1980s end and the forests (lisy, hence “Lisova”) outside Kyiv
begin. There are also many secondhand sellers at Troyeshchyna Market,
Kyiv’s largest public market, also on the Left Bank. It has a reputation much
wider than just secondhand goods, and during its peak in the late 1990s and
at the turn of the millennium, had as many as 5,000 stalls and employed as
many as 20,000 Kyivans (Riaboshapka, 1998, p. 4; and Ruble, 2003, p. 145).
All of these places and other secondhand outlets in the city have been
periodically raided by authorities, with goods being confiscated by police.
If the goods are ever seen again, it is at another market where the inventory
is resold after it had been purchased from corrupt officials. The large sec-
ondhand section of the Shulyavska Market burned down at least five times
from the start of 2006 through April 2007 (Boksha et al., 2010, p. 80), and then
again on March 20, 2012, with the causes never resolved. However, workers
at the market are convinced that the fires were started deliberately to drive
them out of business and free up the land. The market was closed altogether
by police on March 16, 2012 (Tuchynska, 2012a). Hundreds of workers were
displaced as a result, many of them immigrants from West Africa and other
foreign regions. When questioned, Kyiv’s municipal officials cited structural
problems with the highway bridge above which the Shulyavska Market had
developed as a reason for closing the market. They are almost certainly
accurate in their assessment of a bridge that, even to my untrained eye,
looks to be in need of repair, but there are infrastructure hazards galore in
Kyiv and elsewhere in the country and there seems to be no explanation as
to why this particular deficiency caught engineers’ attention.
Many reasons are given for officialdom’s constant war with the secondhand
markets in general. “Official” reasons have included that the markets lacked
required permits, that used clothing is said to be unsanitary, that a bad image
of Ukraine is presented when citizens wear cast-offs from other countries,
and that the goods being sold had found their way to the market through
less than honorable means. On the other hand, vendors at these markets, for
whom livelihoods are at stake, as well as purchasers, for whom the markets
provide much reduced prices, have protested, saying that the true reasons
for anti-secondhand campaigns are (i) to support the formal retailing sector
and Ukraine’s lobby of struggling clothing manufacturers; (2) that someone
else wants the land; and (3) that police and other officials are not satisfied
with their cuts of market income. It is also said that at least some secondhand
markets (and other categories of markets, too) are controlled by mobster
owners, allegedly foreigners from the Caucasus, Russia, or Israel, who operate
independently and pay for the privilege in taxes or bribes. Indeed, vendors speak poorly of their landlords, saying that they are extortive, but then fear being evicted should the landlord be able to identify the source of criticism.

Racism is also a factor in the precarious existence of some markets. At the Troyeshchyna Market, for example, where there have been a reported 500 workers from Afghanistan, “several hundred from Pakistan,” more than 120 from Bangladesh, and “many from China and other countries,” police have routinely conducted roundups of vendors and hauled them away in buses to detention centers even though many of them were Ukrainian citizens or applicants for citizenship. While in lockup, they filled out endless forms and faced other harassment until they paid the required bribes. In a series of such raids in 2010, it was reported that a bribe of 50 hryvnia (about US$6) would move a detainee ahead of others in the processing queue, while double that amount would buy one’s release. Some vendors have been arrested multiple times, only to be released each time by a judge who understood that the arrest was nothing more than a shakedown attempt by police. At first, a police official explained to news reporters that such actions were necessary because “amid entrepreneurs who work legally, illegal immigrants often hide,” but then when no illegal immigrants were found in the operation, he modified his explanation: “Even if they are citizens of Ukraine, what positive contribution are they making to this country? None. They... sell goods of bad quality” (Tuchynska, 2010).

I saw similar disdain for non-European ethnics at the Shulyavska Market before it closed. As mentioned previously, a sizable fraction of the approximately 350 vendors there are of African origin, especially from Nigeria (Figure 8.5). Some of them had come to Ukraine to be students, or to Ukraine via Russia as students, and were now university graduates without jobs other than at the market. A number of Africans dealt in secondhand goods, but most stall operators sold new clothing, especially shoes, jackets, and hip-hop fashion. One day, I was interviewing “Michael,” a Nigerian “boss” among the African vendors, who had just begun telling me some details about police racism and corruption when there was a commotion nearby in the aisles between stalls. “There, look,” he said in English, “That is exactly what I am talking about! Bastards!” I saw that two uniformed police officers and a security guard for Shulyavska Market that I had made note of before were manhandling an African vendor, and taking him away as he protested. “What is going on?” I asked, “Why is he being arrested?” “Oh, it’s

51 For an excellent paper about discrimination against African migrants in the post-Soviet world, see the case study of St. Petersburg by Svetlana Boltovskaya (2011).
not an arrest. He’s done nothing. They are harassing him for money, and he
refuses to pay.” I had a camera with me and asked if I could shoot pictures.
Michael encouraged me to do so if I dared, and as the gathering crowd of
Africans saw me, they parted so that I could have a clearer shot. I had just
started to do well when one of the policemen saw what I was doing and began
shouting at me. He and his compatriots rushed to Michael’s stall to confront
me. “Give me the camera,” one of them demanded (in Russian). I was about to
make a case for why I would not give him the camera when the police were
distracted by a new commotion, this one a ruse by African vendors, in the
aisle outside. As they looked away from me, an African I did not know said
in English “Quick, give me the camera.” Instinctively, I tossed it to him across
the stall, and then it was gone. When the police returned their attention to
me seconds later, they demanded the camera again. Michael whispered to me
in English that I never had a camera, and that is how I replied to the police,
again and again, “What camera? There is no camera. I have no camera,” I
pleaded. Before long, as many as ten other police officers arrived and began
a search of the market, not just Michael’s stall amid the shoes and jeans that
he was selling, but also neighboring stalls up and down the aisle and in next
aisles. “If you give us the camera, we will simply delete the pictures. But if

Figure 8.5  African vendors and their merchandise in the under-highway section
of Shulyavska Market
we find it on our own, we will either smash it or steal it,” is how my main interrogator put it to me. I kept denying that I ever had a camera.

How did it end? Although they never asked for identification or even my name, I think that my being a white American scared the police off. After about a half-hour of questions and searching, they simply left. The African vendor who had been harassed for money was among those who remained after the commotion died down; he thanked me for intervening. Michael told me that I was now one of them, and that I was welcome at the market any time. As a “chief” among the vendors, he gave me his blessing to study the market and interview his compatriots. He told me not to worry about my camera and that I would get it back. Sure enough, about an hour after the police had dispersed, Michael and other African vendors encircled me and walked me back to the Shulyavska Metro Station, with Michael in telephone communication with someone who was walking ahead as lookout. When we reached the turnstile of the subway, one of my escorts reached into his bag and handed me the camera. Michael told me to come back, but not for at least a week to make sure that the incident was truly over. I looked at my photos on the subway ride home. Everything was just right with my camera. A couple shots of the police harassment turned to be quite good in quality, but I decided to not print them to avoid trouble for the vendors who are shown, including “Matthew,” the individual who was the object of police attention at the start of the incident. Not long after all this the market was shut, so I lost the place as a venue for research. The feelings of friendship, however, remain.52

8.5 The Scourge of Prejudice

Racism is indeed a fact of life in Kyiv, as are other prejudices (Starr, 2010). Most Ukrainians are wonderful people and are warm to others, just like any other ethnic group or nationality, but among them there are those who are unacceptably ignorant and bigoted, and a few who would do violence to people of other races or religions, to sexual minorities, and to women. As we have seen with respect to workers of color in the markets of Troyeshchyna

52 Ironically, it is because of a camera incident that I met Michael in the first place. I had wanted to find the boss of the market and did so by arriving one day and shooting photographs without permission. An African challenged me and said to follow him. He took me to Michael and reported with concern that I had been taking pictures of the market. When Michael asked me why, I reported that he was welcome to delete them and that I simply wanted to meet him because I want to learn about the market and its people. Obviously, the strategy worked.
and Shulyavska, police can be part of the problem rather than a source of help or protection, perhaps routinely so. Furthermore, the legal system often fails to protect women from violence or to bring even rapists and killers to justice. Racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other prejudices (e.g., against ex-convicts) are found in probably every society, and Ukraine or Kyiv are not any worse than much of the rest of the world in this regard. Nevertheless, it is necessary for us to consider these problems in Kyiv in order to present a balanced view of society, as well as to acknowledge that for a great many residents of Ukraine (and for foreign visitors, too) there are both hazards in daily life and additional obstacles to long-term success in Ukraine that stem from prejudices. The long history of strained relations between Ukrainians and their Jewish neighbors (Brandon and Lower, eds., 2010; Meir, 2010; Reid, 2000, pp. 139-168) is another reason to underscore that prejudice has been a persistent scourge in Ukraine. However, I also point out that it has been only a little more than 20 years since Ukraine became an independent country, and that prior to then, Ukrainians themselves were targeted as victims of discrimination and ethnic violence on their own lands, not the least of which were the Holodomor and Russian and Polish campaigns against usage of the Ukrainian language (Reid, 2000, pp. 112-138; Subtelny, 1988; Yekelchyk, 2007). That is, the hatred has been directed against Ukrainians, too.

Soon after I came to Kyiv to start this book, I encountered a middle-aged man with dark skin sitting at the edge of Independence Square in a puddle of his own blood. His equally dark-skinned companion was pleading in English for help. It was about 10 a.m. and they were literally sitting in the same light that bathed the Independence Monument. They were visitors from Pakistan who had arrived earlier that day for an academic conference, and had just walked from their hotel nearby for a first look at the attractions of the city when they were jumped by some 8 to 10 young thugs and were beaten. There was no robbery, only a thorough beating and kicking, and some shouting at them that the victims did not understand. The victim who was not in a daze had been trying to get help for his bloodied friend for some minutes, he said, but people simply scattered as he called to them. That was my experience, too, even as I asked in Ukrainian for someone to call the police and an ambulance. Eventually, help did come, but for both ambulance and police car, the help was slow and the drivers made sure to park carefully in a good spot and turn off the headlights before approaching
the victims. A first question from the police was whether the man who was bleeding had done something to provoke the attack. 53

Other incidents have been reported against people of African origin, Middle Easterners, and other foreigners, as well as against Jews and Jewish landmarks, as anti-Semitism in Ukraine, long a scourge, is reported to be on the rise (Brym, 1994; Mirsky, 1994; Rudling, 2006). Because of the history of anti-Semitism in the country (Bartov, 2007; Carynnyk, 2011; Gross, 2001; Himka, 2011; Potichnyj and Aster, eds., 1990; Redlich, 2002), watchful Jews worldwide are alarmed, and worry that Ukraine is once again becoming a dangerous place. For example, the newspaper Jerusalem Post has recently published an editorial entitled “Hatred in Ukraine” that posits that “little has changed” in the country over the decades with respect to anti-Semitism, and argues that hatred of Jews is once more “vulgar and in-your-face – as it was before the Soviets temporarily held the genie [of hatred] in the bottle” (Jerusalem Post, 2012). 54 With respect to Kyiv, the article focuses on the reported beating of Alexander (Aron) Goncharov, a 25-year-old yeshiva student who was apparently attacked by neo-Nazi thugs after he left the Brodsky Synagogue on the night of April 8, 2012. Likewise, the New York-based Jewish Daily Forward has also reported about anti-Semitism in Ukraine, although it appears open to the possibility that one or more of the most virulent recent attacks against Jews, including the alleged attack against Goncharov, may not actually have been motivated by religious or ethnic bigotry. Still, as one of that newspaper’s Jewish informants, the principal of a Jewish school in Bila Tserkva, a medium-sized town about 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of Kyiv that has long and rich history of Jewish settlement, explained, “Anyone who says there is no anti-Semitism [in Ukraine] is living with their eyes closed.” 55 Among other evidence, there is documented vandalism against Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, and common usage of the offensive word zhyd (Yid) when referring to Jews,

53 This is my own account of the incident as I witnessed it personally. Additional information was reported in Grushenko (2011).

54 The charges of “hatred in Ukraine” might well be true, which is why I write about them here, but it is also true that the article could have been entitled “Hatred of Ukraine,” because that is how it reads: Ukraine, Ukrainians, and especially western Ukrainians are all painted unfairly as murderous anti-Semites with a broad, black-smearing brush that oozes with undiscriminating hatred.

55 See Berger (2012). The article refers to the name of the town as Belaya Tserkov, the Russian name. Usage of outdated Russian spellings reflects the usage that Russian-speaking émigrés living in the United States are more familiar with, but is also said to reflect a certain antipathy to things Ukrainian.
especially in western Ukraine where relations between Ukrainians and Jews have historically been most strained.56

It may be that the recent rise of the political party Svoboda (Freedom) is also a manifestation of Ukraine's scourge of prejudice. Led by a charismatic and talented speaker, Oleh Tyahnybok, who insists that the movement is pro-Ukraine only and not racist or prejudiced against any group, the party, which has its origins in western Ukraine, has recently won its first seats in the Verkhovna Rada and, until recently, seems to be gaining in popularity as an opposition alternative to the Party of Regions. However, critics say that Svoboda is racist and anti-Semitic, and equate its brand of nationalism with fascism and collaboration by western Ukrainians with the Nazis in World War II. The Jewish media sources cited earlier are most emphatically alarmed about Svoboda's rise. The party was founded in 1991 as the “Social-National Party of Ukraine,” and until 2003 used as a logo a swastika-like symbol that was explained as an interlocking of the capital letters I and N (without serifs) standing for the Idea of Nation. The symbol was commonly seen as being neo-Nazi and so the logo was officially dropped. In 2004, the name of the party was changed as well (formal name: All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda”) in a further attempt to separate itself, at least for public consumption, from the neo-Nazi and anti-Russian elements that it had come to be associated with. Time will tell exactly what Svoboda is, but for now I conclude that there is reason to be wary because creepy people with creepy placards and banners, including the spooky I/N symbol, do show up in numbers at Svoboda rallies and marches.

There is also the issue of homophobia. I am disappointed to report that a person needs to be either exceedingly brave or simply foolish to be openly gay or lesbian in Kyiv (and even more so elsewhere in Ukraine), as harassment is common and even routine, and unprovoked beatings of LGBT

56 This is not the place for a detailed account of anti-Semitism in Ukraine or of Ukrainian-Jewish relations. However, it might help to consider the succinct summary of Ukrainian-Jewish relations by Orest Subtelny in his widely praised Ukraine: A History (1988):

[T]he relationship between Ukrainian and Jews was not – nor could it hardly have been – a friendly one. For centuries, the two peoples found themselves in structurally antagonistic (yet mutually dependent) positions. To the Jew, a Ukrainian represented the backward, ignorant village; to a Ukrainian, a Jew epitomized the foreign, exploitative city that bought his produce cheaply and sold farm goods dearly. Ukrainian peasants feared Russian officials and hated Polish landlords; Jews, for want of other means for making a living, often acted as their representatives or middlemen. Culturally, the Jews and Ukrainians had little in common, and their religions only widened the gaps between them. (pp. 277-278)

Also see the article “Ukrainians and Jews and Ukrainians and Jews...” in Alexander Motyl's always interesting blog (2011b).
people take place all too frequently (Matiukhina, 2012). A prominent LGBT activist in Kyiv told me that a first step when planning any event is about security to make sure that “right-wing thugs” (such as those associated with Svoboda) do not show up and start beating people. Usually, this involves maintaining secrecy about the exact place and time of the event until soon before it takes place, and dissemination of information via targeted channels such as email lists and SMS messages. They might also maintain a lookout on the street to warn of the possible arrival of thugs. But thugs do arrive nevertheless and beat gays, typically with impunity.

The story of a Gay Pride parade that was planned for central Kyiv on May 20, 2012, is illustrative. Called KyivPride 2012, the “coming out” event was to be the first of its kind in Kyiv, and was purposefully planned for a date close to the start of the Euro 2012 football tournament when European eyes would be on the country. Organizers believed that it might be safer for participants to march while Europe was watching and also that Kyiv authorities would give them permission to march for the same reason. Permission they got, as homosexuality is legal in Ukraine (as of 1991) and discrimination against homosexuals is illegal, but the outcry against the event was instantaneous and scary. There were two prominent anti-gay protests in the city before the event, one on April 27 in front of the office building of the president of Ukraine and the other on May 10 at the large plaza in front of St. Michael’s Church in the heart of historic Kyiv. As reported by the Religious Information Service of Ukraine, groups who called themselves the “Parents’ Committee” and “Youth for Healthy Life” were in the forefront with placards reading “No to Sodomite Sin” and “Homosexuality = AIDS” (RISU, 2012). Political leaders and clergy also weighed in with opposition. The comments of Communist Party of Ukraine parliamentarian Yevhen Tsarkov are representative of commonly held attitudes: “Our society is traditional and just does not tolerate homosexuality. If some people are suffering from the mental illness of homosexuality, they should not display it in public and promote it to children” (Tuchynska, 2012b). After threats of violence against the marchers mounted on the Internet along with calls for “tough men” to break up the event, KyivPride 2012 was called off. This was the advice that the police gave to the organizers of the event instead of a promise to beef up protection. But even still, there was violence against gays, as the “tough men” who showed up just in case found some march officials in conversation

57 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.
58 The first ever Gay Pride parade in Kyiv was held a year later on May 25, 2013. Because of the threat of violence, it was a small event.
with members of the news media and attacked them even with cameras rolling. The beating and stomping of Sviatoslav Sheremet, head of the Gay Forum in Ukraine, by a gang of vicious toughs hiding behind masked faces and baseball caps is evident for all to see (Tuchynska, 2012b).  

Then, about a full month later on June 22, 2012, Taras Karasiichuk, the main organizer of KyivPride 2012, was attacked with no warning as he walked at night from the Metro station to his apartment by a masked man who asked if he was a “fag” (pidor in Russian) and then kicked him in the head and jaw before fleeing (Human Rights Watch 2012). Months later, during a Human Rights Day march in the center of Kyiv on December 8, 2012, gay marchers were attacked, beaten, and sprayed with tear gas by tough young men from the Svoboda political party, which boasted on its website two days later that “thanks to the five nationalists [who conducted the attack], the Sabbath of 50 perverts was broken up” (Tuchynska, 2012c; 2012d).

With this as backdrop, it should not be surprising to learn that social opportunities and nightlife for gays in Kyiv are quite different from those in many other European capitals. Whereas other cities have many LGBT institutions and an open LGBT nightlife, as well as residential neighborhoods that are identified as being heavily gay, Kyiv has very few places that are known openly as gay or lesbian spots and no areas in the city that gays can call their own or even regard as a safe zone. Rainbow flags are almost nonexistent, and there are almost no symbols on the doors of cafés, pubs, and other business establishments that signal a gay-friendly environment. Displays along these lines would invite vandalism to property and physical harm to proprietors and clients. The gay night spots that do exist operate more or less clandestinely, although there are three or four places that get mentioned fairly prominently as gay bars or clubs when doing an Internet search about gay Kyiv. Some places have a “LGBT night” on a given day of the week, while in other cases the venues where gays gather rotate from place to place so as to not offer a fixed target. LGBT people typically dress like everyone else in the city so as to keep a low profile, but when they do dress differently or know that they can be identified in some other way as a sexual minority, they are especially careful about their surroundings and keep an eye open for possible trouble.  

59 Sheremet was bloodied but was not seriously injured. No one was arrested for the attack.  
60 For an engaging parallel discussion of lesbian spaces in St. Petersburg, see Sarajeva (2010).
8.6 Roma

Kyiv has many thousands of Roma people in its population. How many thousands is anyone’s guess, as I have heard wildly ranging estimates from about 5,000 to 15,000 to 40,000 and maybe even more. The wide range reflects the fact that little is known about this population in general and that reliable statistics are lacking. In fact, even the numbers given here are uncertain, as I simply repeat them from a source that does not explain their origin and that may or may not be accurate (Chekmenov, 2011). In Kyiv, in Ukraine, in other European countries and elsewhere, Roma or Romani people as they are often called nowadays, or Gypsies as they were commonly called in the past, are prominent minorities, more so than numbers alone would dictate, and are at or near the bottom economically in whichever country they live. In Ukrainian they are called tsyhany. They are targets for inordinate prejudice and discrimination, but are also seen, perhaps through lenses of prejudice, as people who willingly reject sincere offers of help and chances for full integration into society. Their history is long and complicated, has taken them in various migrations across a wide map, and has included attempted extermination in the Holocaust and forced expulsions from communities, cities, and even entire countries. This is not the place to repeat the story of the various people who are collectively known as Roma, and readers are steered instead to fine studies such as those by Fonseca (1995), Hancock (2002), and Liégeois (1983). It is appropriate, however, to say at least a little about Roma in Ukraine and their place in Kyiv.

Kyiv, like most other Ukrainian cities, has only a very small percentage of the population that is Roma (5,000 to 15,000 of 2.8 million is about 0.02 to 0.05 percent; 40,000 is about 1.4 percent). Even in Uzhorod, a Ukrainian city on the border with Slovakia and near the border with Hungary that is said to have a high concentration of Roma population, their percentage is only about 1.5 percent of the total. In Ukraine as a whole, the Roma population is 47,587 as counted in the census of 2001 (0.01 percent of the population), although estimates say that their actual numbers are closer to 400,000. Whatever their number, Roma are more visible than population totals because they stand out by how they dress and comport themselves, because they are often seen in groups rather than individually or simply in pairs, and because their habits and occupations often bring them to urban centers where visibility is maximized. Paradoxically, at the same time, many Roma

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61 The two words are often used interchangeably as synonyms, although technically Roma are a subgroup of Romani. There is considerable variety within Roma and Romani populations.
live isolated from the rest of society, sometimes in remote camps in forests at the margins of cities. Most speak one or another of the dialects of Romani among themselves rather than Ukrainian or another national tongue, and may or may not know the national language. Many of their children do not attend school by choice of the parents or ethnic habit, which isolates the minority all the more even as it stands out for its differentness.

In Kyiv, Roma are seen daily in the center of the city, especially along Khreshchatyk and some side streets, where they work as beggars and petty vendors. They tend to be the same people over and over again, and are part of a clan that is transported almost daily from an outlying camp to work all day and often deep into the night among the passersby in the city center. Roma are also said to engage in crimes such as theft and pickpocketing, but I have never seen this personally and have not seen data to support such a contention. In my experience, the worst is perhaps pretending to be more needy than is actually the case, as in the case of a “pregnant” beggar who is mysteriously not pregnant when seen later, and then suddenly pregnant again when kneeling on the sidewalks the next day and asking for handouts. Also, there are instances of child labor among Roma that could be classified as crimes, because Roma children are often seen begging or working long hours as vendors at very young ages. Other Roma are sometimes visible in the center of the city as musicians – sometimes as street musicians who work for tips and other times as hired acts in popular live music venues where customers pay an admission charge and for food and drinks. Thus, for many Roma the urban center is a resource for making a living. I can’t know this for sure, but it is also said, and seems plausible, that the right to work in the center is something that was negotiated by one or more clan heads or Roma barons with city officials who receive payments in return. Other Roma groups are not part of the deal and do not work this turf. The barons make money off all the men, women, and children who work under them, and can become exceedingly wealthy. Apparently, some barons also operate narcotics businesses. Among the attractions of the city center for Roma, in addition to a higher density of passersby, is the presence of many foreigners. They are more inclined to give than the local population, if only because they are less aware of beggars’ scams. It is not my role to undermine anyone’s way of making a living, but honestly it seems that some of the most pathetic and most poor-looking Roma beggars are simply actors that Ukrainians are wise to and that foreign visitors feel sorry for.

Although there are Roma leaders who own businesses and live in luxury off the labor of their underlings, as well as professional thieves and beggars among Roma for whom honest labor is something foreign, there are also
many Roma who work extremely hard at physical jobs and struggle to make a living in the face of a wider society that does not give them an honest chance. It is a complicated topic to discuss job discrimination against Roma, because one reason that not many hold steady jobs is because not many want such jobs, preferring to be independent without a boss and without scheduled hours for work. On the other hand, there is prejudice against Roma as well and widespread assumptions that they are not willing to work, so the only alternatives are to work independently. In Kyiv as elsewhere in Europe, many Roma make a living as scrap collectors, particularly of metal (Figure 8.6). They haul it from where old buildings are being demolished, rusted factories, trash bins, and other sources, and sell it to recycling companies. I have seen numerous instances in which a strong Roma man is carrying a load of metal on his back or in a cart of some sort, and heads with his treasure into the forest. In some cases he is accompanied by a pregnant wife, so the image is one of a young couple working hard to make a living.

Roma camps sometimes have sizable piles of rusted and twisted metal that await truck transport for sale. Those same camps are also known to have terrible housing conditions that are sometimes nothing more than plywood or cardboard, or a rusted auto body, and essentially no running water and no sanitary facilities. They are squatters’ camps on public land, and are often cleared by authorities against residents’ protests on grounds of public health. There are also quite a few instances where Roma camps

Figure 8.6 A Roma husband-and-wife team of metal scrap collectors at work
have been set on fire, presumably by racist neighbors who want the Roma to leave. In fact, there are reports that some such fires are started by the police on behalf of neighbors, or that police simply look on when a fire does take place and Roma scramble to retrieve possessions (TSN, 2012). Because of these and other experiences over a long history, Roma tend to be mistrustful of people outside their communities and can seem insular. They are often portrayed in the media as impossible to assimilate into society (Basarab, 2010; Lazareva, 2010; Zavhorodnya, 2010), and as a subculture of scammers, liars, and thieves (Chekmenov, 2011). Perfect strangers sometimes shout unprovoked insults at them and yell that they should go away, so the Roma draw inward and tighten their defenses. The circle is vicious, to be sure. However, also to be sure, I know personally that Roma can be warm and welcoming once initial suspicions have passed, and are actually pleased that an outsider takes an interest. My own experiences with Roma, both in the city as along Khreshchatyk, and in and near the forests at Kyiv’s margins have been normal and positive. Being introduced by someone the Roma trust was especially helpful.