

STORIES

# Encounters with Homo Sovieticus and Digital Ukraine



By Tim Louzonis January 07, 11:05

1797

0

0

0

0

## **What's the difference between a capitalist fairy tale and a Marxist fairy tale? - an old Soviet joke**

I'm that annoying guy next to you on a flight, who will talk to you if you don't immediately slip on your noise-cancelling headphones. Much the same way, I always make it a point to talk to taxi drivers in Ukraine. These men (they are usually men) will offer you unfiltered political views and colorful social commentary, often

whether you like it or not.

On a scorching day last summer I fired up the Uklon taxi app and within minutes I was sitting in a sparkling new Toyota with a slick dashboard-mounted GPS system. We began crawling along Khreschatyk in midday traffic and against the soft purr of the car's air conditioner, the disgruntled forty-something taxi driver began ranting and raving about how life was so much better in the Soviet Union when most people had had "good jobs" and that in today's Ukraine there is nothing for the people. In my seven years in Ukraine I've had many similar encounters.

Usually I attempt to lighten the mood, telling these drivers, "Hey, I was an exchange student in Odessa in 1993 and back then sour orange juice sold in boxes was a luxury good and we were all millionaires in kupony." But this man was having none of it and continued his diatribe, telling me that the only solution was to shoot Ukraine's current leaders. In the US we might call someone like this a "low-information voter" or an "angry white man."

Now I don't know this man's story, how he came to own a brand new Toyota, or why he was driving it as a taxi.

But I do know that the economic system of Papa Lenin wasn't turning out GPS-equipped luxury sedans with climate control systems back in the day. I'm also quite familiar with the tired sermons of the nostalgic of Homo Sovieticus, who preaches to me about the bygone golden era of economic prosperity that never was. I should be more sympathetic—this man was enjoying only the superficial benefits of globalization and technology, but

clearly he was being run over by the train of economic progress.



© Photo by [Ivan Bandura](#)

While I try to be sympathetic to those left behind in the wake of the Soviet economic collapse, my own encounters with Homo Sovieticus in Ukraine have become too brief and limited for me to claim that I deeply know and understand him. Since moving to Kyiv about a year ago, I've had little contact with the Soviet mindset aside from taxi drivers, cleaning ladies, and cashiers at the supermarket.

Unlike some of my expat comrades, who work in manufacturing, agriculture, retail, or light industry, our business serves foreigners and I'm largely shielded from Homo Sovieticus, and my dear business partner usually handles whatever "local" contact is required. (Come to think of it, he does curse a lot more often than I do.)

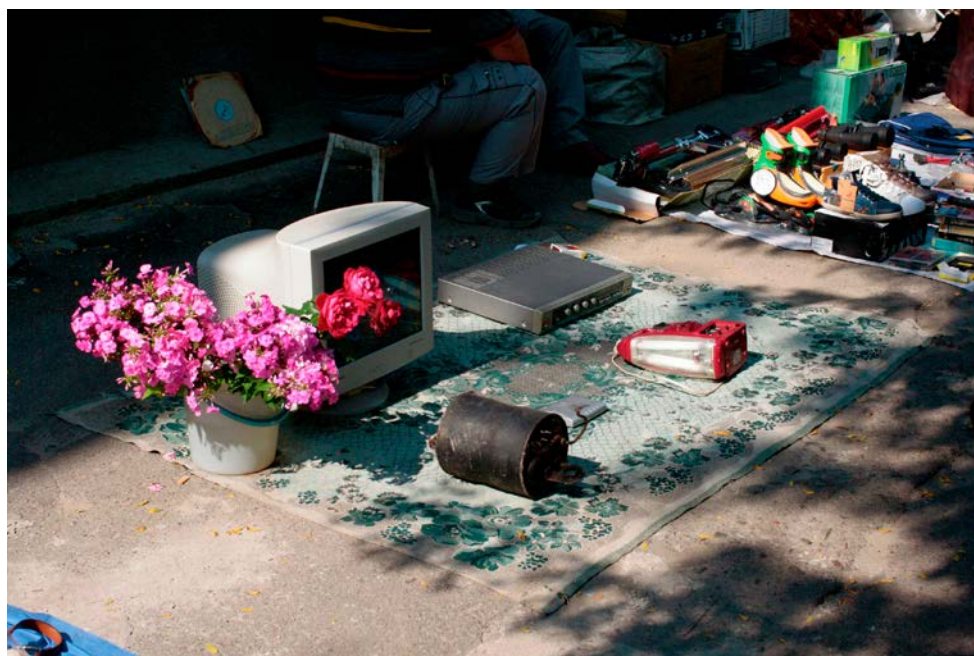
For me it's all too easy to see grotesque caricatures of Homo Sovieticus instead of living and breathing human

beings. This often happens when I ride Kyiv's metro: reeking of garlic and vodka, casting an overpowering body odor, holding clenched fists and a tight jaw, chest puffed out, elbowing its way into a crowded subway car, staring out with hostile "dead trout" eyes, a wounded animal claims its territory. Each time I'm struck by the spectacle of it, but not the poker-faced passengers around me, who've deftly deployed their eye contact avoidance systems, to them he's just a normal part of the quotidian human landscape, as they carry on with VK, Facebook, Instagram, or their masked internal monologues.

## **"Guys, the era of the geek is upon us" - J. Rodda, Middlebury College, Class of '95**

A few years ago I was taking the night train from Kyiv to Lviv. Earlier that day my sleeping car neighbor had been in Kyiv for a job fair sponsored by Amazon Web Services. He told me that it had gone well and he was expecting a job offer, but he was unsure that he'd want to move his young family far away from his children's grandparents; but anyway he'd have time to think about it. We chatted late into the night about the pro's and con's of him staying in Ukraine and keeping his job at a small game developer in Lviv versus moving to Seattle and adjusting to life at a big company and to the cultural differences in the US. Upon waking the next morning he already had an SMS with a job offer from Amazon. Well, at least he got to sleep on it. I had just encountered Digital Ukraine, a key battleground in the global war for IT talent.

One of my first contacts with Digital Ukraine was an IT guy named Alex, whom I met at an English speaking club in Lviv in 2010. At first I thought Alex might be from South Asia. He had darkish features and the faintest of accents in English and I really couldn't place him anywhere in the English-speaking world. One of his secrets, he explained, was reading books only in English because bestselling technology and self-improvement books often aren't immediately available in Russian after their publication and this Tim Ferriss disciple didn't want to wait. Alex also opened my eyes to Lviv's underground economy of digital workers. Instead of seeing lazy young people hanging out in cafes all day and night, he helped me to recognize Amazon's mechanical turks, Behance's designers and to understand that many IT workers were moonlighting on Elance for extra cash.



© Photo by [Betty Roytburd](#)

Alex once asked me, “Did you know that tiny Lviv [pop. 700,000] has often ranked in the top ten alongside some of China and India’s mega cities for total value of

completed freelancer tasks on Elance? So there is all this hidden wealth among the Lviv's young creative class and doubtlessly all across Ukraine. But having highly marketable skills for location-independent work makes residence in Ukraine unnecessary for a lot of these young people. Alex and I did a little web project for visitors to Lviv, but it wasn't surprising when he moved to the US several years ago.

Often Ukraine's young people don't wait until after university to leave the country. I guess I'm enough of a geek to make amateur anthropological assumptions about Ukraine using the demographic data that are visible in Tinder's dating app. (This misuse of the app partly explains why I'm still single). During this year's winter holidays I couldn't help but notice that most of the "new people in [my] area" tend to be young women with a degree from, or who are attending, an American or European university. I can only assume that they have come back from abroad to visit their families and then they will head back overseas for opportunities they (and their parents) don't see in today's Ukraine. But perhaps more research is required.

## **Healthy discontent is the prelude to progress - M. Gandhi**

These two Ukraines—Homo Sovieticus and Digital—exist side by side, alternate universes within the same country, city, on the same bus and subway car.

Sometimes I wonder how long they will co-exist. Digital Ukraine is young and talented, but it is also ambitious, restless and a constant flight risk. Countless Cassandras have long predicted the total collapse of Ukraine as a

result of brain drain and their voices will only grow louder if visa-free travel with the EU becomes possible later this year. I usually feel that this talk is overblown. But how much longer can Ukraine continue to eat its seed corn and live off the Soviet legacy of excellence in math and theoretical sciences? When will new investments in education and healthcare happen so that life in Ukraine will become more appealing for young, upwardly mobile, globalized Ukrainians and their children? Will we one day witness a complete hollowing out of Ukraine's young and talented class and be left with passive-aggressive Homo Sovieticus and his oligarchic overlords like something out of a bad zombie movie? No...that movie is already playing next door in the Land of the Wounded Bear and even Ukrainian Homo Sovieticus isn't clamoring for a sequel.

### **Let's get in touch**

In this column I'm going to explore the many facets of Kyiv's expat life and subculture. What's your Kyiv expat story? Drop me a line.

*Tim Louzonis is a co-founder of AIM Realty Kiev and a long-time expat with Ukrainian roots. [Follow him on Facebook.](#)*