

Lack of state:

Anarchy in the Ukraine

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Racing along a bumpy Ukrainian highway at over 200km per hour is a way of life to the new car lords of Odessa. In the passenger seat of my friend Sasha's custom-modified Mercedes, I entered eastern Europe's bravest new world

Julian Evans

Julian Evans is the author of the biography "Semi-Invisible Man: the Life of Norman Lewis" (Jonathan Cape)

Central Odessa on a summer Saturday night takes some beating. Crazy tall young women and their athletic boyfriends stroll in clusters on a grid of warm, acacia-shadowed pavements in an atmosphere of imminent hedonistic surrender. The restaurants and cafés, both folkloric and minimalist, are full. Competing sound systems, the volume fractionally too loud for anyone over 35, merge in and out of each other on the warm air all the way from the spruce municipal gardens at the bottom of the pedestrianised Deribasovskaya Street to the Opera and Ballet Theatre at the top; and carried on the billions of jiggling molecules of air, in invisible but strengthening ribbons, is the salt scent of the Black sea. To reach the sea itself, though, you must go further, past the flamboyant Opera and Primorsky Boulevard, Odessa's first esplanade, and the cars.

The cars. They begin on Ekaterininska Street. Parked, or crawling towards Ekaterininska Square and the circus at the top of the Potemkin Steps. They are body-kitted, performance-packed, breathed-on, loved-up, current-model BMWs, Mercedes-Benzes and Audis. These are the common horde. Walk a block to Richelievskaya Street and you will see a new Cadillac or two, three or four Porsches, a couple of Jaguars. Walk back and there will probably be a Bentley Arnage T idling double-parked at the intersection, its hood asparkle.

The caravan of cruising motor cars that shows off on weekend nights around the central blocks between the Opera and the Bank of Ukraine has been going on since the fall of communism. The competition intensifies each year. I first visited in 1995, when most non-Soviet cars on the streets were stolen, big BMWs and Mercs with blackout windows that hurtled down the cobbles of Pushkinska Street on their way to the casino at the Londonskaya Hotel.

Last summer, Bentley Continentals and Aston Martins were common among the two-a-penny black Hummers and Audi and Volvo performance SUVs, while the prize for exclusivity had moved up to be shared by a yellow Lamborghini Murciélago and a Rolls-Royce Drophead Coupé, surely the most aimless car ever built. Both were from out of town: the LP640 had a German plate, the Rolls-Royce, licence number H00001,

was registered in Moldova, a friendly country with no economy to speak of.

I was in Odessa, as every recent summer, to elude my working routine for a while. I originally came to the city at the end of a dull river trip from Kiev to the Crimea. I fell at once for the panorama of yellow mansions at the top of the Potemkin Steps, the piecrust houses and crumbling courtyards with their stubborn country gardens. These days, after 18 years of capitalism, my Ukrainian friends have ordinary cars, Hondas, Nissans and Ladas, with one exception—Sasha, whom I met at an Odessa wedding. He buys Mercedes, though to my knowledge—because he is based in Kiev—he has never participated in the Odessa car spectacle.

The reasons for this ritual of pronounced swank are many. Odessa is a seaside town and a port (two ports: Odessa itself and the big Yuzhny oil terminal). It has a seaside town's vulgarity, a port's criminality. Until 1858, to help its merchants and the region grow, it was a freeport. Since 2000 it has been one again. In between, smugglers used every method, including the catacombs that honeycomb the city, to clear cargoes without payment. Today, hundred-million-dollar businesses follow the re-export route to the secessionist Moldovan enclave of Transnistria a few kilometres away, from where goods are smuggled back to Ukraine for sale.

And the city is hot—30 to 35 degrees in summer. With its long shore of beaches, it has always been a pleasure resort. As Isaac Babel anatomised it in *Odessa Stories*, Odessa was a no-brainer for gangsters who liked a party. It still is.

Gangster or businessman? For a long decade in post-communist Ukraine, there was no means of differentiation. When states collapse, the race is to the swift as well as the covetous. Cars are metaphors in that realm: the wheels of fortune. In his 1920s story "How Things Were Done in Odessa" Babel describes the character of his young "king," Benya Krik: "You are a tiger, you are a lion, you are a cat. You can spend the night with a Russian woman, and the Russian woman will be satisfied by you. You are 25 years old. If the sky and the earth had rings attached to them, you would grab these rings and pull the sky down to the earth."

Benya drives "a red automobile with a music box for a horn." The new car lords of Odessa, his spiritual grandsons, are showing off their business acumen, having a good time (and no doubt satisfying Russian women), establishing pecking order. A few years ago their car might have been the most expensive thing they owned. For many that is the past. The new mansions this year are gaudier than Beverly Hills.

If "business" in post-communist Ukraine has been synonymous with criminality, criminality in turn meant the rise of new mafias, Russian, Ukrainian, Crimean, Chechen, Turkish. But these were only new forms: the thieves' economy that existed in the USSR begot them. Under Brezhnev and Gorbachev—even under Stalin and Khrushchev—the vory (godfathers) and later avtoritety (authorities) abetted the universalising of the Soviet black market.



“In the last decades of the USSR, not a single product has been manufactured and not a single paid service has been performed outside the confines of the black market,” Lev Timofeyev wrote in *Russia’s Secret Rulers* (1992). By deep habit, senior communists considered themselves the owners of Soviet assets, due an owner’s share. The car lords’ status games may be outlandish: only someone who has driven on Ukraine’s highways will appreciate the utter abandon of belting a £217,000 Italian automobile with 14cm of ground clearance across the country. But they are a consequence of decades of deformity (as western bankers have recently been shown to be in the capitalist world).

And if Ukraine’s mafia is not separate from politics, its politicians have equally been part of the apparatus of crime. A spate of “suicides” followed the failure of the Russophone presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, to debauch the electoral process and secure re-election in 2004, as the conspirators settled scores. One was Heorhiy Kirpa, a railway baron, wealthy from rake-offs, found dead in his sauna at Kiev. He had initially provided trains for Yanukovich supporters, but had had second thoughts before the last vote. Yanukovich himself apparently knocked out two of Kirpa’s teeth when he heard of his associate’s change of heart.

Kirpa was also in charge of the new 500km Kiev–Odessa autobahn when he was murdered. I have driven the road and had several near-misses on it, once with an unlit farmer’s seed-drill moving at 20kph in pitch darkness. I’ve also been driven on it once. This was also in 2004, after my friend Sasha drove from Kiev to Odessa for a weekend and offered me and my family a lift back to Kiev to make a visa application.

Sasha, I had worked out, only bought Mercedes. “The best car in the world? The latest Mercedes,” he would say, and each year he went out and bought one. That year it was the E55 AMG, recently awarded, to Sasha’s satisfaction, the title of the world’s fastest saloon car. The E55 was black, with the over-engineered shape that is inseparable from aggression in the bigger Mercedes. It sat in front of the house where we were staying—the neighbours had already been to complain that it was so heavy it would crack the water main. My three-year-old son was impressed. Sasha offered to show him some of the modifications and flicked a few switches. Police lights installed behind the grille flashed blue-white-red; a siren wailed; the siren became a bass klaxon. Leaning over, Sasha took something from inside the glove box. I asked the significance of his licence plate—a row of O’s.

“Kuchma [Ukraine’s second post-communist leader] gave it to me,” he said. During lunch, he gave me the object he had taken from the car for my son to play with. It was his pistol. I had heard that Sasha had been a member of one of the two Crimean mafia “families.” He had started out as a driver and bodyguard, and been present the night both groups found themselves in the same restaurant at Simferopol. After the fight that followed, he was carried out with 28 knife wounds.

But he was irrepressible company (he appeared that weekend dressed in white, pouring out Chablis and charm) and had never sought to implicate me or my family in his professional life. He was a childhood friend of a diplomat I knew whose sister got married in 2000. At the wedding party he sat down at our table, an intelligent-featured man who spent the night teasing me about how little money writers made and rattling off folk songs on a borrowed guitar. The closest I had got to knowing about his activities was when I once asked him what he did. “I think,” he answered.

On the Sunday when Sasha drove us to Kiev, we left just before midday. He drove slowly out of Odessa, then pulled an illegal left turn onto the northern motorway. I knew his appetite for speed. This time the acceleration went on and on, the needle rotating past 200kph.

The Kiev motorway in 2004 was a poor road by western standards. Leaving Odessa, we were on one of the better stretches but it was crowded with Ladas and Zhigulis moving in a relaxed daze. Sasha switched on his militia siren and flashing lights; if a car didn't swerve aside, he flipped on the bass klaxon a metre from the offending driver's rear bumper. Almost all traffic scattered at this, with jerks of shock. For the few still reluctant to comply, he unhooked a microphone connected to a militia PA under the Mercedes' hood, and ordered "Na prava priniai!" ("Pull over!"). They did.

Why wasn't he stopped? There were militia at the roadside, eager to flesh out poor salaries with unofficial fines. But the owner of such a car was, by definition, untouchable: he had to be at least a senior government official. From behind the smoked glass, their awestruck faces receded at speed.

We rocketed down this substandard Ukrainian road, the car's suspension and traction working overtime, the distance between it and the cars Sasha threatened and coerced out of his way dangerously short. I remonstrated with him. For an answer he took his hands off the wheel. The windscreen closing in fast on the rear of a bread truck, the car pulled out to overtake on its own, using its predictive guidance system.

There is also, I learned, a kind of fraternity and a shared driving style in Ukraine. After about 100km I noticed we were being followed by a green Audi. Sasha didn't recognise the car. He laughed and pulled out his pistol. "Any trouble and I'll deal with it." But the Audi's driver simply seemed to admire Sasha's driving. A code began to operate between the two men, Sasha occupying the crown of the road longer than he needed when he overtook to keep the oncoming traffic cleared for his follower, the other acting as an enforcer with sluggish drivers. Once, through a long cutting where the road was single lane with steep earthworks on both sides, a careless HGV driver pulled out to overtake, forcing Sasha to brake hard. He contented himself with standing on his klaxon and edging the truck onto the hard shoulder, but the driver of the Audi decided on further punishment. Coming alongside, he edged the truck higher and higher up the earthworks until the cab was driving at a seemingly impossible angle, the driver's face white and terrified. Eventually, moments before the cab was twisted from the 40ft container it was hauling, he gave the man space to come down.

We stopped at a roadhouse for caviar sandwiches and Chivas whisky with apple juice. (The apple juice stopped you getting drunk, Sasha claimed.) For the last 200km the Mercedes, siren on, lights flashing, forced its way, often the wrong way, through jam, contraflow, construction works. Wherever Sasha saw a straight way through, he kept going.

We arrived at Kiev in just over three hours, two hours less than the normal journey time. After a shower and some sushi, Sasha bounced up. "Let's go and see my new dacha." The place was 25km south of the city; we used the presidential central lane of the highway, whizzing past pine forest and the grey steel walls of President Kuchma's

retirement estate. Beyond them, ministers, officials and businessmen have colonised several kilometres of the banks of the Dnieper river, building according to personal status and how much their position has enriched them. The settlement is a hallucinatory small city of palaces, into which something can be read about the fears and pretensions of Ukraine's ruling class. Between mock French châteaux and immense, garish exhibitions of the Ukrainian baronial style there run high walls and access roads patrolled by CCTV. The only signs of life along these roads on a Sunday evening were building workers, straggling home after spending their week's pay at the beer kiosks that had sprung up to serve them.

Builders were a constant pain in the arse, Sasha said, as we stood inside the shell of his relatively modest dacha (four bedrooms, gym, swimming pool, garaging for four cars). He had been sent to prison for three days after hitting his foreman (though the whole thing had been a set-up by a business rival, he said: the man was wearing a wire). In jail he got his wife to bring in three bottles of whisky. He then got the prison guards so drunk they had let six men escape, for which he had been punished with another week inside.

In the last years of the USSR, they said, everyone was building his own communism; the tragedy is that in Ukraine everyone is building his own capitalism. And local habits don't show much sign of modification. In Odessa, if you want to get anything done officially, it is still said that you must find the person in the administration you need permission from, then find someone else to ask how much they want. Meanwhile the mafia is learning, like the politicians, to show more sophistication and has diversified into continental Europe, the US and Britain. As long ago as 2002 Jane's Intelligence Review reported that "Ukrainian organised crime has become a threat to the... stability of Ukraine, and a threat to the international community via the ties it has developed with other criminal and terrorist groups."

My own evidence is circumstantial. Three times in the last year I have been overtaken on English motorways by two or three current-model cars in black or silver, travelling in convoy. Most recently, the two Audi S5s that passed me on the M4 were moving so fast I could smell aluminium in their wake. The driving style, hugging together, slowing for nothing, is instantly recognisable. We exported a version of capitalist liberty to the Soviet republics, and, interpreting it for themselves, they set it down, wheeled and gleaming and playing arias on its horn, on the streets of Odessa. We shouldn't be surprised they are bringing it back home.