

Russian visitors in Kyiv:

Recommendations for tourism stakeholders

Research project: «Tourism as memory-making: heritage and memory wars in post-Soviet cities» (ESRC New Investigator Project ES/R011680/1)

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1 Introduction

Before the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas, Russian tourists used to be to one of the largest groups of international tourists in Kyiv. The number of Russian visitors number has plummeted by nearly 80% in 2014¹ but has started to grow slowly since 2016.² Despite the difficulties to reach Kyiv from Russia and the uncertainty about whether it is safe to travel, a small number of Russians visits Kyiv as tourists. They return with mostly positive impressions which often contradict the mediated image of Ukraine in Russia.

This report gives insights into the experiences of this group of tourists; it outlines their main motivations to visit Kyiv, their expectations and impressions. Based on the findings we propose a set of recommendations on how to facilitate touristic visits from Russia at the end of this document. The report was written as part of the research project "Tourism as Memory-Making" (2019-2020), which examines Russian tourism to different cities in the former Soviet space and is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

The report is based on a two-months ethnographic study in Kyiv in July and August 2019. It draws on in-depth interviews with 10 tourists from Russia who had visited Kyiv either during the time of research or shortly before. They had been contacted on Zhulyani Airport, with the help of tour guides and via social media. The respondents, seven women and three men, were between 20 and 62 years old and except for one Siberia-based respondent all came from the Moscow area. The report further draws on additional interviews conducted with tourism and heritage stakeholders which are used to contextualise the tourist interviews. The findings do not claim to be representative of all tourists travelling to Kyiv from Russia, but they provide important insights into a group about which we currently know very little.

2 Motivations and expectations to visit Kyiv

The motivations that tourists from Russia name as factors that contribute to their decision to visit Kyiv can be broken down into three groups:

1) Kyiv is perceived by Russians as both culturally and geographically close. It is expected that travel to Kyiv will be cheap. Over the past years, due to the ongoing war, these expectations in some cases turned out to be wrong. Especially flights from Russian airports, with a stopover, usually in Minsk, are more expensive than low-cost holiday flights to alternative destinations.

2) Existing personal connections to people living in Kyiv are a main motivation for Russians to visit Kyiv. Besides family ties these can be connections that originate from work

¹ Ukrstat, foreign visitors to Ukraine by country

http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/operativ/operativ2007/tyr/tyr_e/arh_vig_e.html

² Novoe Vremya, 13.10.2019, <https://nv.ua/ukr/biz/markets/turizm-v-ukrajini-ukrajina-pidnyalasya-v-reytingu-turistichnoji-konkurentospromozhnosti-novini-ukrajini-50047498.html>

collectives, former university or army friends etc. A new category of transnational connections are those made in the (Russophone) internet, often around a narrow interest. Enthusiasts for niche interests are likely to find fellow enthusiasts online.

3) Many Russians attach a historical importance to Kyiv that coalesces around the city as the centre of the medieval Kiev Rus, the Cave Monastery as a centre of religious learning, art and pilgrimage, Kyiv as an important theatre in World War II and the Holocaust. Visitors who take a markedly dissident position towards the Russian government were also drawn to the most recent history of Euromaidan as well as hearing Ukrainian perspectives on the ongoing war.

Other factors play subsidiary roles in tourists' travel decisions: Tourists are curious to explore the gastronomic scene and the nightlife, have a special interest in a specific architectural landmark or artwork, enjoyed the slower pace of life in Kyiv and comparatively fewer changes to the historic built environment.

Tourists associate Kyiv with an old, historic city; therefore one expectation of tourists is to see lots of old architecture and archaeological sites. Some tourists come with a sense of adventure but also expect to witness poverty. Among the interviewed tourists many also expect to witness much that is familiar to them, especially Soviet architecture. They usually think of Kyiv as a large and vibrant capital city.

3 Travelling to Kyiv

Most tourists from Russia travel to Kyiv by sleeper train, by bus or Blabla Car, or they fly with a layover in Minsk. A major obstacle for visitors from Russia is the access to unanimous travel information. During a partial introduction of martial law in November and December 2018, following the Kerch strait crisis, Russian men of conscription age were banned from entering Ukraine. This ban has since been lifted and martial law was quickly terminated, however there are hardly any reliable sources of information, least of all in Russian, that would give a clear indication of what visitors would have to expect when crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border, which documents they need to present and which questions they might have to answer. The internet is awash with rumours and for many of the interviewed tourists, these rumours were their best guess. A Russian woman, who visits Kyiv annually, named these difficulties as the reason why she cancelled a planned visit:

А год назад я вообще не попала, должна была тоже туда ехать, на эту конференцию, но именно в этот период был запрет на въезд, и несколько моих коллег не пустили, а так как я должна была ехать после них уже, я просто отменила поездку, потому что было плохо со временем, и застрять в аэропорту на сутки, как мои коллеги, у меня не было возможности (Tourist Interview 6, 08.08.2019).

Earlier travellers were the most reliable source of information, either personal contacts or travel bloggers on YouTube. The scarcity of reliable information and the abundance of

rumour add to a sense of insecurity that also affects tourist's friends and family, who in some cases tried to dissuade travellers.

Моя семья первое время меня не понимала. Они очень волновались, потому что СМИ (не те, что в интернете из разных источников), именно федеральные каналы. транслируют искаженную информацию, и моя семья, честно говоря, боялась за меня. (Tourist interview 5, 04.08.2019).

4 Getting around

Kyiv is relatively easy to get by thanks to online tools such as Google Maps and Easy Way. Classic taxis as well as Uber, Bolt and Uklon are all available at relatively low cost. The Kyiv metro has been upgraded to a user-friendly guidance system in Ukrainian and English for the EURO 2012. Most other forms of public transportation, particularly trolleybuses and marshrutkas, require a considerable degree of local knowledge.

Some of the general infrastructure problems that affect the mobility of ordinary Kievans, also reflect on tourism. Kyiv's metro and marshrutkas are nearly impossible to use for passengers with a stroller or in a wheelchair. Tourists travelling with young children or tourists bound to a wheelchair have to hire a car or a private tour guide with a car in order to travel between the main sites.

The major tourist attractions in Kyiv are accessible at affordable prices. Museums are very cheap compared to museums in other tourist hotspots. The two UNESCO world heritage sites St. Sophia Cathedral and the Cave Monastery which have the double function of being churches and state museums, have access procedures that are found confusing by some tourists. In St. Sophia one can access the main cathedral only with a ticket, whereas services are held in a side building that at times of services can be accessed for free. In the cave monastery both the state museum and the church sell separate tickets and separate guided tours whereas during services the territory can be accessed for free by churchgoers. It is at the discretion of a guard at the gate entrance to decide who is a tourist and who a churchgoer.

There is an extensive range of Russian language walking tours offered to tourists, with accessible information online and in kiosks. Walking tours from big firms such as Interesniy Kyiv, Kievskiy KOD, or ProUkraine usually take place as advertised, punctually and without last minute amendments. Group walking tours by smaller providers and by freelancing tour guides are sometimes advertised online as if they were going to take place definitely but then are cancelled with a last-minute phone call, sometimes along with an offer to go on a different tour some other day. For visitors with limited time who had set their mind to attending a particular tour at a particular day, this can be a nuisance.

5 Language barriers

There are few language barriers for Russian tourists in Kyiv. Most Russians can read enough Ukrainian to find their way round. Most Ukrainians can switch to Russian if needed. Language barriers are therefore more symbolic or psychological. There is widespread insecurity among Russian tourists whether speaking Russian in public might lead to them being reprimanded or even prosecuted. Even after tourists discover that Russian is widely spoken in Kyiv, some retain a sense of insecurity about their accent. Some tourists believe that Kievans switch to Ukrainian on purpose upon hearing their recognizably Russian accent and interpret this as a signal that they are not welcome.

Tourist services like guided tours continue to be offered in Russian language. For commercial walking tours or bus sightseeing tours, Russian is the language that reaches the broadest target audience and there is rich supply of Russian language tours. In museums and memorials Ukrainian is now clearly the dominant language and often English is the second language. For stakeholders Russians are no longer an especially privileged group of foreigners but are not considered less welcome than other foreigners either.

6 Tourists' historical interests

It is widely known among tourists that Ukrainian perspectives on the past have been changing over the period of independence and that street names and museums were altered and Soviet era monuments were removed to reflect changing interpretations of history. Tourists visiting Kyiv's historical sites or excursions usually do not perceive this negatively. Guided tours are shaped by hospitality and cooperation between guide and tourists. Tourists want to have a good time and usually are not looking to contest the guide. If tourists anticipate they will not like the representation of the past in a certain place, they avoid such places.

Other visitors consciously seek to challenge their perception and push their horizon by listening to perspectives that might contradict theirs:

На самом деле, мне было интересно посмотреть и узнать, как происходили майдановские события от человека, который там был, потому что российская пропаганда работала очень активно и убеждала жителей России в том, что как все ужасно, как все происходило, переворот (Tourist Interview 6, 08.08.2019).

7 Recommendations

On the basis of the research we make the following recommendations:

- Use the Visit Kyiv website for up-to-date information about the legal situation for travellers from Russia that specifies which documents have to be presented when crossing into Ukraine, which categories of people might face travel restrictions and which questions are part of the border control procedure.

- Use the Visit Kyiv website to clarify that travellers from Russia are welcome and not uncommon in Kyiv and that verbal or physical attacks against them are very rare.
- Use the Visit Kyiv website to clarify that although Russian is not an official language in Ukraine, its use, like the use of any other language, is not a legal offence and that Russian is, in fact, widely spoken in Kyiv.
- Promote the installation of route plans in Ukrainian and English, similar to those in Metro trains, in marshrutkas and trolleybuses, especially in lines that lead to or from the central train station as well as to and from the city's two international airports.