https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article9268

Ukraine

Free public transport in Ukraine

- Features -

Publication date: Wednesday 19 November 2025

The common weal versus capitalist modernity.

Free public transport can open cities to all. It combats social injustice and can also help to tackle climate change, by moving away from car-centred urban transport systems.

Public transport has been made free in more than 130 municipalities in Brazil – and, in Europe, Luxembourg; Tallinn, Estonia; Belgrade, Serbia and several French cities.

In this interview, the writer and activist Denys Gorbach talks with Dr Simon Pirani about Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine, where municipal public transport has been made free – but with mixed results. Zhenya Polshchykova, a Ukrainian activist in social movements, also joined the conversation.

Simon: Please start by telling our readers who lives in Kryvyi Rih, what do they do, and where is it? Is it near the front line?

Denys: Kryvyi Rih is a very large mining town, better called a city, with 600,000 inhabitants. At the peak it had nearly a million, and according to some conspiracy theories, the population actually reached a million, but the Dnepropetrovsk region authorities never wanted to acknowledge that, as that would require the creation of a separate region.

Now the population is around 600,000. Economically Kryvyi Rih is a mining and steel town, with a mostly working class population. The front line is about 100 kilometres away.

Simon: What is the state of the public transport system? What are the respective shares of public transport and private cars in volumes of transport?

Denys: Kryvyi Rih is a bit special because of its geographic layout: it is very long and narrow. Traditionally, the city was not car-dominated at all, but because of the difficulties of getting from one part of the city to another, in recent decades, it has become more and more common for working class people to get cars. Kryvyi Rih, including the road infrastructure, was built mostly in the 1960s, for a much larger population. Historically the public transit was determined by the rhythms of the industrial enterprises where most people worked.

Currently, although cars are becoming much more common than 20 or 30 years ago, still the main roads – the so-called red line through the city – is six, or at some points eight, lanes. The two outside lanes are never used, except for parking. The second lane is used by people who are on the lookout for a bus or a marshrutka [a privately owned and operated minibus that usually follows the route (marshrut) taken by public buses]. People tend to walk across these unimaginably large highways at random, without relying on crossings, because it’s relatively safe. All in all, I would say that cars are not as overwhelming in the public landscape as they might be in London, for example.

Simon: You mentioned buses and marshrutki. Are these the main forms of public transport? And please explain what marshrutki are.

Denys: Buses are the most widely used form of municipal transport. Then there are trolleybuses, which structurally resemble buses, but run on electricity and require overhead cables; trams, which are mostly restricted to central areas of the town; and what locals call the metro. It's not really a metro, rather a metrotram – a tram that runs underground. These are the four means of transportation that existed at the beginning of independent Ukraine, in 1991. And during the 1990s a fifth mode was added, the marshrutka or mini-bus, which evolved more or less spontaneously, to fill the gaps created by everything that was happening in the economy.

Initially these were private mini-buses or cars of whatever provenance, that could take a dozen or so people, and they were not regulated at all. It was a temporary and spontaneous fix that later got codified and found its way into laws. So now, in the post Soviet space, a marshrutka usually means a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, refashioned to add windows, to make it suitable for carrying passengers. Or it could be one of the minibuses designed and produced in Ukraine for that purpose. The marshrutki are judged to be more reliable, more frequent, and more flexible in terms of where they can stop, than buses. They are in direct competition to classic municipal transportation.

Simon: So buses, trams and trolley buses are free, but marshrutki are not. How much is the fare?

Denys: Fifteen hryvnias.

Simon: In Russian cities I have visited, including Moscow, the marshrutki were privately owned, while other public transport is owned by the municipality, and the 1990s privatisation did not encroach on that sector. Is that also the case in Kryvyi Rih?

Denys: I do not know about Russia, but that is not the case in Ukraine. Public transport was one of the first sectors affected by the 1990s privatisation. The municipal transport enterprises [ATPs or avtotransportnye predpriatiia] were very quickly sold off under the "voucher privatisation" scheme: each employee received shares, and there was no clear owner. ["Voucher privatisation" of profitable enterprises notoriously resulted in the shares being accumulated by rich owners who soon took control.]

These transport enterprises were not profitable; on the contrary, the privatisation was first and foremost a means for the public authorities to get rid of financial liabilities. And the buses went very quickly into disarray and disrepair.

The marshrutki were private, from their beginning, in the 1990s. And even though, legally, they are the same types of private enterprises as the bus companies, there is a distinction that holds very much in the lay imaginary: buses, trolleybuses and the rest are perceived as being public, belonging to the public domain or the common weal, whereas marshrutki are something new, modern and non-socialist, harbingers of capitalist modernity. They are publicly perceived as being in the domain of private initiative.

This had implications in the domain of transport fares: with the cost of living skyrocketing across the country, the national parliament gradually introduced a host of categories of population entitled to reduced or zero tariffs for public goods like heating and common charges, telephone landline, and so on. This included free rides on public transport.

These legal freeriders, lgotniki, included varius groups: pensioners, veterans of labour, the handicapped, veterans of the Second World War, "children of the war" (those who were alive in 1945 or earlier), people who had gone to Chornobyl [after the 1986 nuclear disaster] as first responders, Afghan war veterans, single mothers, orphans, and so on. These laws, however, were disliked by the local authorities, who had to compensate the resulting losses to transport enterprises but had no resources for that in their budgets.

So, in reality, a salutary measure, aimed at alleviating the burden of the economic crisis for the most vulnerable, accelerated the downfall of the whole system of public transportation. Electricity-based modes of transportation, which remained in public ownership, managed to survive in principle, even though their rolling stock was drastically reduced in volume and in quality. As for the newly-private bus companies, facing the fuel crisis after Russia switched to market prices for oil, they quickly went bankrupt. By the end of the 1990s, conventional “big” buses ceased to exist, which was perceived as a normal development: according to the then mayor of Kryvyi Rih, Yuri Liubonenko, “their time has passed”.

At the same time, marshrutki managed to escape these regulations thanks to their novelty: nobody really knew what exactly one should do with these new and shiny vehicles, ostensibly “commercial” as opposed to the dying off “public” buses. The national legislation on lgotniki did not cover them, and locally, a compromise was eventually negotiated: the city council obliged them to take one free-rider per journey, and even this has been hotly contested: stories about rude marshrutka drivers yelling at poor grandmas (or, now, military veterans) claiming their right to free ride still abound.

On the other hand, the drivers are not exactly the evil profiteers, either. The usual scheme of a marshrutka company is highly informal: the owner of the company possesses little to no rolling stock; he obtains all the necessary permits, concludes the contract with the city council (usually, he is personally close to the mayor or other notables), and then looks for drivers who often come each with their own minibus.

The driver has to give the owner a fixed sum of money for each day of work; the rest of his daily revenue is his salary, out of which he has to buy fuel and maintain the vehicle. All of this is hardly taxed or accounted for in official records. The driver is “free” to self-exploit as hard as he can to maximise his income; he is also free to go home and stop serving the line as early as 9 pm, when passengers become more scarce. This autonomy puts him in a zero-sum antagonism with the granny who wants to exercise her right: if he lets her in, his daily income is 15 UAH [Ukrainian hryvna – currently there are 48 UAH to 1 euro] smaller.

Simon: So we came out of the 1990s with a public sector that is NOT public in the sense of ownership, is in a mess, and has had nothing invested in it. And we have marshrutki, run by 1990s entrepreneurs. How did we get from there, to public transport being made free? And why?

Denys: Free public transport sounds more spectacular than it is on the ground in Kryvyi Rih – although it is better than nothing. So, since 2020, all municipal transportation is free, which is cool. The problem is that this does not include the marshrutki. The realities on the ground are that, on the back of the recovery of economic growth in the 2010s, the fleet of public buses reappeared, but it constituted a fraction of what it had been in Soviet times [up to 1991]. The last figure for the municipal bus fleet I have, for 1997, is 210-220 units. In 2019, the ‘restored’ fleet is 15 units, growing to 23 in 2020. Trams and trolleybuses never completely disappeared, but their numbers were “naturally” cut by half over the period between 1995-2020.

This restoration was mostly a work of political imaginary – a fetish that was supposed to represent something – rather than doing the job of actually taking people places! Now, once fares had been abolished, this became mainly the domain of people who are rich in time but not money, such as pensioners, children and students … whereas people of working age have no time to wait for an hour or more for their bus to come. So the bulk of the working population use the paid marshrutki. In reality there is a two-tier system.

Simon: Our friends in Brazil tell us that in many cities there, they had a poorly-invested public system on one hand, and the Brazilian equivalent of marshrutki on the other … and local governments decided to invest in the public system, which would otherwise collapse. And they also decided to make it free, and to make it a good service, to compete with the marshrutki. But this is not what has happened in Kryvyi Rih, is it?

Denys: Kryvyi Rih and Mariupol were two cities that resembled each other in their size, economic profile and demography. [At some point in the 2010s] they diverged in their public transport policy. Kryvyi Rih took the road of minimal intervention and minimal investment – and because of that, it was so easy for them finally to take this huge step of rendering the whole thing completely free, because they had been keeping fares low, very heavily subsidised, for years and even decades beforehand. With all the dramatic currency devaluations of 1998, 2008, and 2014, the nominal fare between 1997 and 2020 grew less then tenfold: from 0.3 to 2.5 UAH. The strategy was: low investment, low outcome.

Mariupol, partly because the political power vertical was more pronounced, and the mayor was more closely linked to the Party of Regions [led by Viktor Yanukovych, the president deposed in 2014], followed a strategy of eliminating the small private fleets [of marshrutki], by simultaneously investing in renovation and augmentation of buses in the municipal domain. So public transport was of much higher quality, more available in terms of frequency and circulation – but also quite expensive. [This refers to Mariupol prior to May 2022, when it was occupied by the Russian armed forces.]

So you might find pluses and minuses in both situations. Probably most people who read this interview would prefer the second one! If you have a rolling stock that is more or less well looked after, then you can do something with it, and make it free in future, rather than having a rolling stock that is dying out.

There is no reason why these two different strategies cannot be combined in Ukraine: push the marshrutki out of existence by market competition, and, then have the political will to do progressive reforms. But in reality, so far, they exist as mutually exclusive alternatives, corresponding to the two different overarching political visions, ways of “humanising” capitalism, none of which is probably completely convincing.

Simon: Going back to Kryvyi Rih’s decision in 2020 to make public transport free. Despite all the negatives you have mentioned, was it a big deal at the time? For example, we in Fare Free London were excited to receive from friends in Montpellier, in France, photos of the big party they had to mark the introduction of free public transport. How does this compare?

Denys: Free public transport was preceded by an experiment during the Covid pandemic, when public transport was made free for everyone who travelled – but access to transport was only permitted to those who had a specific need to travel. Then there were local elections, and free public transport was one of the main electoral promise of the incumbent mayor’s designated heir; the other was that everyone gets 500 hryvnias (€10.50) per year as a resident of the city. It’s not much, but “showing that you care” is also important! So there were no public celebrations, but there was the convincing victory of a candidate who otherwise would have had much more trouble getting votes, and the complete disorientation of the nationalist-liberal opposition.

That opposition, whose rhetoric is against political machines and clientelism, and for the rule of law, plus all the nationalist stuff, was completely against making public transport free. From the start, and up until today, once every couple of months, someone from that milieu starts a new petition against free public transport. Every petition fails miserably. It is strange, because they understand themselves that, however inefficient we might think the current system is, and however insufficient, it is massively popular, and no one in their sane mind would want this small piece of public goods to be taken away from them again.

So they can say whatever they want about this being an instrument of political domination and clientelist politics – which it is – but even if the working population prefer marshrutki, anyway their parents and their children use this municipal transport … and it’s free. So they would not like to get rid of it. All this added a new dimension to the local political struggle.

Simon: Could you explain in a few words who are the incumbent party, and the liberal-nationalist opposition?

Denys: Historically, from the mid 2000s, Kryvyi Rih was governed by the Party of Regions, which was banned in 2015, after the Euromaidan events [that ended Yanukovich's presidency]. Then it reinvented itself as two competing political projects. The mayor up to those elections in 2020, Yuri Vilkul, belonged to one of these, the Opposition Bloc, and his designated heir was from the second one, For Life. That heir was elected, but died in strange circumstances shortly afterwards. At present Vilkul is back, as acting mayor.

The liberal nationalist opposition is supported by what you might call the educated classes, who have been an activist minority since the Orange revolution of 2004, never very close to taking power on local level, but sufficiently loud to be heard, to occupy a large part of the public sphere. They are people in the university milieu, journalists, artists, small business people who have no hope of getting incorporated into any political machine, and so they try to build an alternative.

Simon: Readers may know that Kryvyi Rih is the home city of the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyi. Which side is he on?

Denys: When he became president, in the 2019 election, it was a big moment of uncertainty. His rhetoric was very hostile to the mayor and the local elite, but by the time of the local elections in 2020, that elite had had time to regroup. They decisively defeated the candidate supported by Zelensky, who belonged neither to the successors of the Party of Regions nor to the liberal opposition.

Simon: So, public transport is free – and while there was no big street party, it is very popular ... but because buses are so infrequent, most working people go in the marshrutki, and people with no money probably wait. Let's go into this in more detail. Are there times when working people use the free transport? And, second, what might citizens of Kryvyi Rih do, to improve the situation with free public transport?

Denys: There is no impenetrable distinction between those who use marshrutki and those who use buses. If you want to get somewhere, you go out in to the street and take the first thing that comes. If it's a bus or trolleybus, you feel very lucky. Not only are they free, but they are both actually more comfortable than the tiny marshrutki. But the average waiting time for a marshrutka is, let's say, four minutes, and for a bus it's 40 minutes or more. People's preferences are not about values; it's just very pragmatic. (Although it is true that in the 1990s, municipal transport was very clearly marked as the lot of socio-economic "losers". It seems to me that this class dimension has not really been present lately.)

As to what should be done – invest. And besides crowding out the marshrutki, you can regulate them. You have the right to render their owners' life much less pleasant than it is now. In many European cities, for example, whatever the form of property, you can operate public transport if you have the necessary licences, but you are obliged to obey the rules in terms of routes, schedules and so on. The problem in Kryviy Rih is precisely that these legally permissible actions are not conceived of as legitimate colloquially. This was evident when I interviewed people for my research.

One transport expert was fascinated by my description of the system of monthly tickets in Paris: for him these were souvenirs of the long-lost Soviet period. A discounted student tariff … for him, that was socialism, it was so great! But even for this dreamer, it was out of the question to make marshrutki work at night, for example. This is a problem in Kryvyi Rih: after 10.00pm it's completely impossible to get anywhere, because the private marshrutki operators don't want to waste fuel on a vehicle that is less than full. My interviewee said, well, you could have a special night fare to

encourage them, but this is not legal, and who would do that?

Similarly the marshrutki are for some reason allowed to choose the most profitable routes, while the least profitable ones are left to the municipal fleet – which, again, is not something that we have to put up with.

Simon: There are similar arguments in the UK. In London, we have franchising: the city authority offers contracts to private bus operators with conditions attached, including routes, fares and timetables. But in most other cities, the operators can do more or less what they please. The government has agreed that franchising should be more widespread. But this conversation is making me think that there is another option in Kryvyi Rih: the municipality could say to the marshrutki operators: you can operate this route, run so many services an hour, for free, and we will pay you from the municipal budget, funded by general taxation.

Denys: As far as I know, in most cities in the world where public transport is free, the rolling stock is in private hands – in Tallinn, for example. And this works. Plus, in Kryvyi Rih the marshrutki already have an obligation to take one person per journey for free – that is, one person who qualifies, such as a war veteran or a pensioner.

Simon: But it could be twelve people!

Denys: Yes, it could be twelve, it could be everyone – because the principle is already there. For now, just one person travels for free.

Zhenya: May I add something? When we talk about the people who use free public transport, we should add one significant group: the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have moved to Kryvyi Rih as a result of the war, especially since the full-scale invasion in February 2022. Many IDPs chose to move to Kryvyi Rih themselves, hoping to find more job opportunities in a big city. Others have been evacuated in convoys organised by the government from places near the front line, and settled in the big converted dormitories provided by the city. It's difficult to know the exact numbers of IDPs: if people come by themselves, they may register, or not. But according to the official statistics the city hosts more than 83,000 IDPs.

A big proportion of these people are elderly, people with disabilities, and families with children. And even among people of working age, many have no jobs. The financial support they get from the state is insufficient, and has been further cut for some categories. So many of them can not afford to use marshrutki. And because Kryvyi Rih is so long geographically, you often have to take more than one marshrutka for a journey. If you are living on this state assistance, of 2000 hryvnia [about €42] per month, you will think twice about how to get to your destination – or about whether you will go anywhere at all. So IDPs are a significant group of people who have to rely on the free public transport. Then again, because they are IDPs, they are not involved in the political life of the city. If there were municipal elections they would not be able to vote, so their needs and opinions may be not so visible.

Simon: And IDPs are not entitled to free transport on marshrutki, as pensioners are for example?

Zhenya. No, there are no concessions for IDPs.

Simon: Are there any groups or campaigners speaking out on how to improve public transport in Kryvyi Rih?

Denys: This idea has fallen victim to the local population's "capitalist realism". No-one wants to go back on the idea

of municipal transport being free, but demanding something more, demanding that the transport is better, more widely available, and so on – everyone just keeps saying, “let’s be realistic, let’s stick to what’s possible”, and things like that.

Simon: We hear that too. When we give out flyers about Fare Free London, people say to us: it’s a great idea, but it can not happen. We answer them by pointing to all those cities in Brazil, France, the USA and elsewhere, where public transport is free – and without some of the problems that you have mentioned in Kryvyi Rih.

27 August 2025

*Source: **The Ecologist**.*

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: Donate then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of this article for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.