

KYIV KИЇВ

**Intermediate Ukrainian
Курс Української Мови**

**Report for the
AJ Pressland Fund**

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Introduction // Вступ

Привіт! Як справи? Я Джонні! I'm Jonny, a third year PhD candidate at the Department of Geography and King's College. This summer I undertook an intensive course in Ukrainian language (**Українська мова**) at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in Kyiv, which was made possible by the generous support of the AJ Pressland fund. In this report I'm going to discuss my language learning journey, life in Kyiv (and Ukraine), and my fieldwork in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

My PhD research investigates the ways in which nature has returned to Chernobyl in the 34 years since the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986. In particular, I'm interested in a population of free-roaming dogs that live in the Zone, and the different groups of humans that live with, care for, and study them. Some of these dogs are likely to be descendants of pets that were abandoned during the evacuation of the Zone in 1986. My work involves making regular trips to the Zone with Ukrainian scientists, border patrol guards, tourists, and others to learn about the dogs and their relationships with humans (amongst other aspects of animal life in the Zone). Learning Ukrainian, therefore, was an imperative for communicating with my research interlocutors, and has greatly enhanced the quality of my project.

Why Ukrainian? Why Kyiv?

Chernobyl (**Чорнобиль**) is located about two hours by car from Kyiv (**Київ**), the capital of Ukraine (**Україна**). I chose to undertake an intensive course in Ukrainian at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, which is located in the historic centre of the city, in Podil (**Поділ**). But Kyiv, it turns out, was not just a practical choice. Knowing relatively little about Ukraine and Ukrainian culture before coming here, it took only a couple of weeks to realise that Kyiv is my favourite city in the world! Composed of an eclectic mix of architectural styles, river beaches, and hills with panoramic views, I immediately fell in love – **я люблю Київ!** Kyiv's music and art scene, its fantastic Ukrainian restaurants, and its all-round atmosphere captured me from the first visit, for reasons I will discuss in more detail below.

My Ukrainian language learning journey began in November 2018 when I took an elementary Ukrainian course organised through the CULP's Ukrainian Open Language Course and the Slavonic Studies Section of the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages (MML). I started this course with no prior knowledge of Ukrainian or any other Slavonic language – I didn't even know the Cyrillic alphabet, nor the words for yes and no in Ukrainian! – and hadn't ever committed to learning a language properly since merely getting through GCSE French at high school. I was a true first timer when it came to languages with no real prior experience,

unsure what to expect, and unaware that I would become enthralled by languages both practically and theoretically over the course of the next two years. This introductory course not only inspired me in terms of Ukrainian language, but also in relation to Ukrainian culture itself.

Ukraine, however, is a bilingual country, and Ukrainian was only made the official state language on 16 July 2019. Practically everyone here speaks both Russian and Ukrainian, and the native language of Ukrainians varies by region; in broad terms, Ukrainian is more prevalent in the west, whilst Russian is more common in the south and east. Just over two thirds of the population speak Ukrainian as their native language. As such, I encounter both Ukrainian and Russian in my daily life. At first, to my untrained ear, it was difficult to distinguish one from the other in day-to-day street encounters as the two languages share many words and phrases and are often combined in what is known as Surzhyk (**Суржик**). You can regularly hear **Суржик** spoken at markets, where Ukrainian and Russian words are mixed into sentences, but **Суржик** words also exist which are a blend of two variations of a word into one. This often led to some challenging (and funny) interactions, but the moment I became able to easily distinguish between the two – on the street, on television adverts, and on the radio – was extremely satisfying! More recently, I have begun to explore Russian more seriously through language learning applications and informal conversations with friends. Later in this report I discuss the politics, complexities, and history of languages in Ukraine, which have become an integral and fascinating part of my language learning journey.

For those readers with a passion for travel who are considering learning a language for the first time or otherwise, I encourage you to apply to the AJ Pressland fund! Studying for the summer at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy has not only drastically improved my Ukrainian language skills but hugely benefited my academic research, opened me up to Ukrainian culture in myriad ways, and allowed me to make lifelong friendships and relationships in Ukraine and beyond. For that I am truly grateful to the AJ Pressland fund for supporting my studies. Prospective applicants are welcome to get in contact with me to ask any questions about the fund, the application, and my experience in Ukraine at jjt44@cam.ac.uk.

The report is structured as follows:

- Ukrainian course
- Accommodation and local neighbourhood
- Ukrainian culture, other experience, and travels
- My research
- To the future



Ukrainian Course – Kyiv-Mohyla Academy // **Курс Української мови – Києво-Могилянська Академія**

The National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) – the main building of which is pictured above (**корпус 3**) – is one of Ukraine’s top universities and takes its name from its benefactor Peter Mohyla (**Петро Симеонович Могила**). Despite this, it only has around 4,000 students – called Mohylanets (**могилянець**) or Mohylanka (**могилянка**) – but the student body is a tight-knit and supportive community. As previously mentioned, Ukraine is a bilingual country. At NaUKMA, though, students and staff are quite strict about speaking Ukrainian, with only some courses taught in English. This made it the perfect place to immerse myself in the Ukrainian language and to practice speaking as much as possible.

Having undertaken a beginner’s course in Ukrainian at Cambridge before arriving, I had become familiar with the Cyrillic alphabet – something I was overly proud of as a first-time serious language learner! – and had developed a basic vocabulary. This background helped immensely going into my first beginner’s course in Ukraine when I moved here in September 2019. I originally selected NaUKMA on the recommendation of my Ukrainian tutor from Cambridge who studied there during her undergraduate and master’s degrees! The first course I did was a group course

with three other students from Mexico, Germany, and Italy. The group course was extremely good value for money given its small size and the comfortable facilities of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (especially compared to other intensive Ukrainian courses in other parts of Ukraine).

After my first term, however, my frequent visits to Chernobyl for research meant I was unable to commit to a set time each week, so I switched to individual lessons that were arranged on a weekly basis with my fantastic teacher (**вчителька**), Oksana (**Оксана**). **Оксана** is from the West of Ukraine, a native Ukrainian speaker, and is a fellow PhD researcher. She is a linguist, studying Ukrainian dialects, which makes our lessons especially enriching and fascinating as we explore topics related to the history of the Ukrainian language. We tend to have two classes per week to the present day, which are tailored to my needs and interests. I am set homework each week, which includes exercises from textbooks, translations of news articles (**статті**), poems (**вірші**), and fairy tales (**казки**), and listening activities recorded by **Оксана** herself. As my Ukrainian improves, I begin to notice and attune to more and more previously hidden nuances in the Ukrainian language that are symbolic of historic, cultural, and political changes. Learning from **Оксана** and her expertise in Ukrainian language has added an extra element to the ways in which I am able to immerse myself in Ukrainian culture, which has been immensely rewarding.

My course this summer was conducted online, but I am still based in Kyiv. This involved on average two two-hour lessons per day for two weeks. Classes with **Оксана** are well-structured, beginning with greetings – **як справи?** How are you? – in which we describe our feelings and plans for the day. We then tend to move on to some reading activities from the textbook, followed by some activities and translations. We then turn to Peppa Pig (**Свинка Пеппа**) or other online video resources for listening practice before having a broad conversation that often exceeds the time limits of our lessons! Working with **Оксана** for an extended period has given us the chance to get to know each other well and to understand, respond, and adapt to each other's learning and teaching styles.

As previously mentioned, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy has a vibrant student community. Upon arrival, I was enrolled into the International Buddy scheme where I met my buddy – and now real-life friend! – Liza (**Ліза**). With Liza and a larger group of international and Ukrainian students, I have made trips to Uman (**Умань**) for the largest Orthodox Jewish festival in Ukraine and to a number of events in Kyiv including movie screenings, parties, and regular meetups. There was also a trip to Lviv (**Львів**) but unfortunately, I was in Chernobyl conducting research when this was arranged. The community at NaUKMA was incredibly welcoming, and the buddy programme offered me the chance to practice speaking with native speakers and to learn more about Ukraine.

NaUKMA's history as an important institution in the long history of Ukrainian independence, the founding of Ukrainian speaking/reading academia within Ukraine, and its similarities with Western academic institutions make it an exciting and inspiring place to study Ukrainian. In addition, its beautiful campus and its proximity to all of my favourite cafés, bars, other cultural institutions, and the Dnipro (Дніпро) river make studying there delightful.



Traditional Ukrainian clothes (**сорочки**) in my living room. Each **вишиванка** has a unique embroidered pattern and is from a different region of Ukraine.

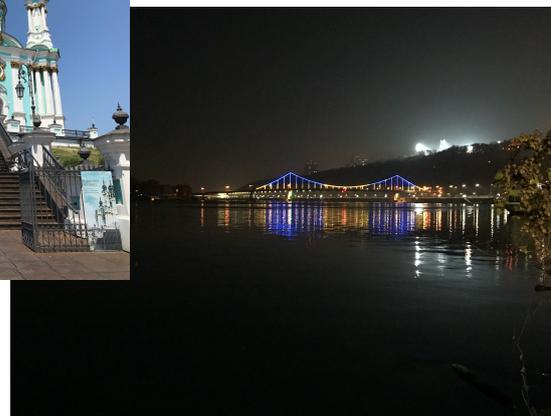
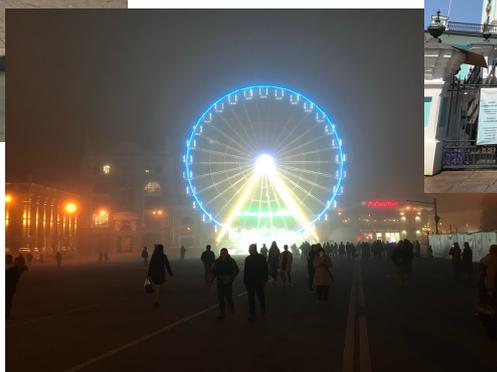
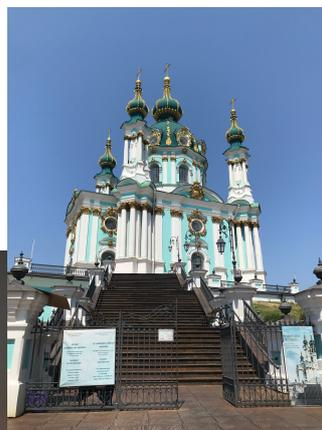


Accommodation and Local Neighbourhood // **Житло та Околиці**

Kyiv-Mohyla Academy is located in the historic district of Kyiv, Podil. The university offered me accommodation, but luckily, I managed to find a wonderful apartment in an old, pre-Russian revolution (1917) building in which I still live today in Podil, only a five-minute walk from NaUKMA. I have a huge bedroom (with fantastic flowery soviet-era wallpaper seen above), a living room, and a kitchen with two balconies. I pay less rent than I did during my first year in Cambridge in which I stayed in a small room in a college dormitory!

Podil is, in my opinion, one of the best areas (**райони**) to live (**жити**) in Kyiv. There are many places for prospective students to stay quite cheaply in hotels, hostels, and elsewhere. There are three Metro stations (**станції метро**), Kontraktova Square (**Контрактова Площа**), Poshtova Square (**Поштова Площа**), and Taras Shevchenko (**Тараса Шевченка**), all of which are close to NaUKMA, allowing easy access to the rest of the city. The latter is named after Ukraine's beloved Taras Shevchenko – poet, writer, artist, public and political figure, folklorist and ethnographer – who is considered the founding figure of modern Ukrainian literature and the modern Ukrainian language. Kyiv's most famous university, Taras Shevchenko, takes its name from him.

Podil is known for its youth culture, graffiti covered walls, its incredible music scene (especially techno and dance music), its diverse range of restaurants and bars (including lots of vegan food!), and its hills that allow you to get above the buildings to see a panoramic view of the city that looks over the Dnipro river, onto Hydropark (**Гідропарк**) and Trukhaniv (**Труханів**) islands, and over to the left bank (**лівий берег**) of Kyiv, which is covered with high rise apartment blocks. Podil was Kyiv's original centre of industry and so has many factory buildings, many of which have been transformed into clubs and music venues. My favourite club is on Kyrylivska (**Кирилівська**) street, and alluringly has no name... Many fun nights have been spent exploring Podil's bars and clubs. As it was the centre of industry, Podil also hosts a number of canteens (**їдальні**) that were built for workers where you can get fantastic Ukrainian food for really cheap. Luckily, I live very close to my favourite bakery Titka Klara (**Тітка Клара**), or Aunt Klara, who serve freshly baked pies (**пиріжки**) every day.



From left to right: my friend (**мій друг**), Adam, visiting me in Kyiv; the Ferris wheel in Podil at night; St. Andrew's Church (**Андріївська церква**); pedestrian bridge lit up in Ukrainian colours passing from Podil to Trukhaniv island.

Upon arriving in Kyiv, my studies were put on pause as I got to know the city, my local area, and made new friends. I spent many days taking long walks to admire the architecture, especially in Troieshchyna (**Троещина**). Using the basics gained from my course at Cambridge and later my courses at NaUKMA, I made every effort to speak Ukrainian in public however bad I was. I have to say, it was a thrilling experience going into shops (**магазини**) and corner stores (**продукти**) where I knew no one would speak English. I often found myself asking for directions and popping into shops just as an excuse to deploy any new phrases I had learned! Luckily, I quickly met some of my best friends in Kyiv at a party soon after I moved here. Natasha (**Наташа**), who lives close by in Podil, speaks Ukrainian as her native language and has always been excited by and supportive of my passion for Ukrainian language, especially because most foreigners learn Russian as a more widely spoken language around the world. Every two weeks, **Наташа** and her husband, Jim (**Джим**), host a borsch party. They get people from all over the world come to their lovely Soviet-style apartment on Nizhni Val (**Нижній Вал**), one of the main streets running through Podil, and they cook homemade Ukrainian borsch (**борщ**) – a beetroot broth, a Ukrainian national dish – as well as other Ukrainian delicacies, such as salo/lard (**сало**), pickled tomatoes and cucumbers (**мариновані помідори та огірки**), potato pancakes (**деруни**), and dumplings (**вареники**), which are all topped off, of course, with a healthy serving of vodka

(горілка)! I've been lucky enough to attend many of these dinners, making some of my best memories in Kyiv so far.



Homemade borsch (домашній борщ) at Natasha and Jim's house with a fish full of vodka!

Ukrainian Culture, Other Experiences, and Travels // Українська Культура, Інші Пригоди та Подорожі

Some readers might be wondering why I am using 'Kyiv' rather than 'Kiev'; a spelling, which was also a surprise to me when I first encountered it. Kyiv derives from the Ukrainian spelling **Київ**, whilst Kiev derives from the Russian spelling **Киев**. The Ukrainianization of place names – Odesa (**Одеса**) not Odessa, Lviv (**Львів**) not Lvov – is representative of the post-Soviet drive to foster an independent Ukrainian identity. Due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia in the Donbass (**Донбас**) region, comprised of Luhansk Oblast (**Луганська область**) and Donetsk Oblast (**Донецька область**), as well as the recent Russian annexation of Crimea (**Крим**), political and cultural tensions between the two countries are strong in some parts of the country. Following the Maidan (**Майдан**)

revolution in 2014, Ukraine has attempted to further distance itself from Russia, establishing closer ties with western Europe. Recently, Wikipedia even changed its spelling from Kiev to Kyiv to recognise Ukrainian as the official language of Ukraine. Since 2019 it has become law to conduct all official business in Ukrainian and for all street signs, official documents, menus, and other things to be written in Ukrainian. It is with these sensitivities and practicalities in mind that I prioritize learning Ukrainian. Even though many of my friends use Russian as their first choice, they are delighted to switch to Ukrainian when with me. One friend, Nikita (**Нікіта**), who comes from Odesa, a predominantly Russian speaking part of Ukraine, is regularly surprised by my Ukrainian, especially when I can find Ukrainian words faster than he can!



Beyond the classroom, I have had many opportunities to practice speaking Ukrainian. Where I live in Kyiv, I regularly encounter Russian on the street, and have to carefully listen and occasionally ask people to switch to Ukrainian; it is a regular occurrence to hear a completely fluid conversation where one person is speaking Russian and the other responding in Ukrainian. Thus, when I travelled to Lviv and the Carpathian Mountains (**Карпатські гори**) in the west, I was delighted to be surrounded almost entirely by Ukrainian native speakers, taking every opportunity I got to practice speaking. Whilst there, I also picked up some new Ukrainian dialect words and vocabulary, such as **файно** as an alternative to **добре** (good), which I was happy to surprise my friends and teacher with back in Kyiv! Interactions with my girlfriend, Karolina's (**Кароліни**), young siblings have also helped with my speaking tremendously as we take them on weekend outings, most recently to collect mushrooms in a forest near Kyiv – a very Ukrainian activity! We also regularly visit Karolina's granny in her hometown, Vinnytsia (**Вінниця**) where I help out in the garden and get a taste of Ukrainian village life; cherry (**вишня**) picking, planting carrots (**моркви**), and making repairs around the house. The course this summer significantly improved my ability and confidence to interact with people in these situations, especially with the relatives of **Кароліна**.



Mushroom picking in the forest and collecting cherries from Karolina's granny's garden.



A view in the Carpathians: a farmer with his cows (фермер з коровами)

As my Ukrainian improves beyond day-to-day interactions, it has been incredibly rewarding to engage with Ukrainian music, film, poetry, and literature. Before lockdown, I went to see a screening of **Земля** (meaning land, earth, or ground), a silent Ukrainian film made in Soviet Ukraine in 1930 at the Dovzhenko (**ДОВЖЕНКО**) centre. The subtitles were in Ukrainian and the movie was accompanied by music from **ДахаБраха** (DakhaBrakha), one of my favourite Ukrainian bands that plays a mixture of Ukrainian folk and modern music.

My Research // **Моє Дослідження**

From Kyiv, I make regular trips to Chernobyl to conduct my PhD research. Chernobyl is actually a Russian transliteration but has gained widespread traction in the English-speaking world. In Ukrainian, it is spelled Chornobyl, transliterated from **Чорнобиль** rather than the Russian, **Чернобыль**. I work with both Ukrainian and international scientists (and others) in the Zone to broadly understand how nature has been impacted by the fallout from the 1986 nuclear catastrophe and to explore the human-animal relations that have emerged in the Zone since the disaster. I spend a lot of time speaking with guards who work on the various checkpoints throughout the Zone where dogs can regularly be found living. Being able to speak Ukrainian even just a little bit makes the world of difference to this research, allowing me to build relationships with those I work with, and to allow them to feel more connected to me. My main guide in the Zone, Ihor (**Ігор**), has seen my Ukrainian improve over the course of the last year, and being able to speak with him in one of his native languages gives us both great pleasure. The summer course at NaUKMA greatly improved my confidence with introductions, pleasantries, and general topics of discussion so I can communicate my intentions and broad questions to those I work with in the Zone. As I regularly message my teacher, **Оксана**, my writing has improved drastically so I regularly communicate with my interlocutors via messenger applications and they send me pictures of the dogs when I am not in the Zone. The summer course, therefore, is enhancing my research greatly through allowing me to foster close relationships with my research interlocutors.



With **Ігор** and the dogs in Pripyat (**Прип'ять**) in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (**Зона Відчуження Чорнобіля**).

My research also took me to Kherson Oblast (**Херсонська Область**), to Askania-Nova (**Асканія-Нова**) biosphere reserve, a UNESCO world heritage site where the wild Prezewalski's horses that currently live in Chernobyl were brought from. During this trip, I took a tour of the reserve and learned more about the horses. I also explored Kherson Oblast, including beautiful natural areas including Stanislav (**Станіслав**) and the island of Dzharylhach (**Джарилгач**), which is known as the Seychelles of Ukraine.



To the Future // **Майбутнє**

The connections and relationships I have made in Ukraine and the potential for future research concerning nature at Chernobyl mean I am committed to continuing my Ukrainian language learning experience. Recently, I have enrolled on an intermediate course, again organised by the Slavonic Studies centre at Cambridge, which is taking place online. Having taken the intensive course in Kyiv this summer supported by the AJ Pressland fund, I am now so much more confident and capable going into group classes where others have much more experience with language learning than I do. This makes the group classes a much more fun, rewarding, and beneficial experience. As well as this, I am enrolled in a twice-weekly class at NaUKMA, and I have begun to learn basic Russian vocabulary.

As my Ukrainian improves, I am also committed to translating my work into Ukrainian and to publishing versions of it here in Ukraine so it can be read by my research interlocutors and those with an interest in Chernobyl. I would also like to communicate my research to wider publics and have been in contact with the Ukrainian National Chernobyl Museum to discuss curating an exhibition on Chernobyl's nature. This will be a fantastic opportunity to deploy my Ukrainian language skills.

Дуже дякую вам! Thank you very much to the AJ Pressland fund for the experiences made possible by their support. Thank you also to Maria, my first Ukrainian teacher at Cambridge, who introduced me to Ukrainian language and Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and **Оксана** for her ongoing help. The intensive summer course was the most sustained and intense period of study I have undertaken in Ukrainian and I continue to reap the benefits today. The improvement I made during the summer has broadened my horizons and ignited my passion for Ukrainian language even further. Thanks to **Кароліна, Діана, Наташа,** and **Нікіта** for always encouraging me, and **Кароліна** for designing this cover. **Дякую ще раз!**



Wearing my **Українська вишиванка**.