

Returning to the unknown

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I have rewritten this story several times already, and I cannot find the right words to make the presentation sufficiently objective and less emotional. This situation is very complex and ambiguous, tragic and painful, so each time returning to it, rereading and rewriting the lines written earlier, they all seem redundant and wrong. Nevertheless, I will try to concentrate on my personal life situation, to convey on paper the experience and impressions that I had few months ago.

It all started with the fact that after two years of the coronavirus pandemic, I finally managed to leave the Czech Republic for Russia and see my mother, since I don't have anyone from my family besides her. It seemed that the worst was over, and only a bright future lay ahead and it was time to move on. At the airport, I could not hold back the tears of joy and relief, I wanted to forget these crazy two years of restrictions and fear. The planned trip was quite short, so we decided that I would return for the Easter holidays. The date of departure for Prague was set for February 28, but nevertheless I was not destined to return in time.

On Thursday, February 24, I woke up earlier than usual and out of habit decided to check the news on my phone. A chill ran down my back, and a lump formed in my throat from the headlines I saw on the Internet. In the depths of my soul, there was a hope that this was all misinformation or just some kind of mistake. It was the worst development imaginable. First of all, I thought about how to tell my mother about this, how to formulate it so as not to upset her as much as possible. She is a pensioner and after several years of a pandemic it's harder for her to handle with stress. But I couldn't say anything than "Please don't read the news". We spent that morning in silence, it was impossible to find the right words, they just didn't exist anymore.

The next day, rumors began that Poland and other EU countries would soon close their airspace to Russian aircraft. I contacted my friends from the Czech Republic, but panic hovered around. They told me "run while you can", "Russia will close the borders", "transport your mother abroad". It was very scary. I thought that I would have time to fly back, there were only two days left. Moreover, the government of the Czech Republic announced a decision to stop issuing visas to citizens of the Russian Federation, with the only exception of humanitarian ones. All previously issued visas for Russian citizens will be reviewed for danger. In addition to the above, cutting off Russia from SWIFT was on the agenda, which meant huge financial consequences for the Russian population abroad. According to the visa system of the Czech Republic,



foreign students have access to the labor market not immediately, but after a couple of years of residence in the country. Thus, students will not be able to receive financial assistance from their parents, they will simply have nothing to live on, nothing to eat and nothing to pay for the university, without the opportunity to get a job. There is also a reverse situation, when Russian migrants send money to their homeland, where their parents live, who are retired and cannot provide for themselves.

On February 26, Charles University sent out an offer of help to all students from the Russian Federation on any issue. For the Ukrainians, another letter was sent with the same offer. I felt relieved and very grateful, because after what had happened, I was mentally ready for anything bad.

My personal story of moving to the Czech Republic began in 2013, when I was only 17 years old. It was a rather deliberate move on the part of my family, which, nevertheless, carried many risks. It's hard for me to imagine what it was like for parents to send their child over 3,000 km to a completely different world, where people speak a different language, behave differently, the place itself is not like what you are used to seeing every day outside. I was sent to the preparatory courses of the Czech language and other subjects necessary for the university. At first, it was very difficult, the whole world turned upside down: separation from parents, the absence of any familiar environment, loneliness. Step by step, I overcame difficulties, adapted, did not give up. All this was necessary for a "better life", I was assured, and now, after almost ten years of living in the Czech Republic, I understand what my relatives meant. I have never regretted the moving and now I see it as a huge opportunity that is now out of reach for many.

In the following days, the news began to grow exponentially like a snowball. On February 27, it was confirmed that the EU is disconnecting Russian banks from the SWIFT payment system. Moreover, Google, YouTube and Meta have removed all monetization from state media channels. The mentioned organizations assured that the Russian state media would not receive a penny from them. The information war has begun. On the same day, Anonymous, an organization of programmers, reported a successful cyber-attack on some Russian websites and TV channel servers. Users now see video materials from Ukrainian TV channels with the consequences of attacks on cities. In some places Ukrainian music is broadcast instead of videos.

On the evening of February 27, the EU completely closed the airspace for Russian airlines, as well as for private aircraft of Russian citizens. My plane from Moscow to Prague was also cancelled. It was completely unclear what to do next. The EU countries were preparing another package of sanctions against the Russian Federation.

The next day, we decided to connect the phone to a VPN and download encrypted messengers while we could, in order to further communicate with my friends from the Czech Republic, as well as with my mother when I will leave. Everyone around was talking about the fact that the police or any other civil servant can come up on the street and check correspondence, saved pictures, etc. to check support for Ukraine. Indeed, in the Russian Federation they said that the provision of physical or material assistance to the Ukrainian military is regarded as treason. For such an "offence" relies up to 20 years in prison. "It must be taken into account that the provision of financial, logistical, consulting or other assistance to a foreign state, international or

foreign organization or their representatives in activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation contains signs of a crime under Article 275 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation” (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, 2022).

The date when I could leave for the Czech Republic was unknown, so it was decided not to waste time and start making documents that might be useful to me in the future. For example, it was a new passport, since the old one expires in January 2023. The problem was that the Russian Embassy in the Czech Republic practically suspended its work these days, even before all the tragic events to get at least some document or the same passport could take up to six months, and now it is generally unknown when.

On the day when I decided to apply for a new passport at the local police department, I was amazed. There were huge queues of people who also wanted to get documents in order to be able to leave the country. The queues went almost to the street. People were on the nerve, both civilians and employees, many sorted out the relationship in a raised voice.

On February 28, the following news dissonance occurred: RIA Novosti published an article that students (citizens of the Russian Federation) are being expelled from European universities due to the situation in Ukraine (RIA Novosti, 2022). To this, a number of Czech universities immediately issued a public appeal refuting this information, but in Russia, many took it at face value. All my friends started calling me and my mother with obvious curiosity asking if I was expelled from the university, if I would return to the Czech Republic, and if so, why. Of course, this caused irritation to some extent, because being already in a state of uncertainty and suspense, it was difficult to try to prove the opposite in a stressful situation.

New sanctions appeared every day, the consequences of which were difficult to imagine. Airbus and Boeing stopped selling spare parts to Russian airlines out of solidarity with Ukraine. This meant that after some time, sooner or later, due to a lack of spare parts, planes would stop flying in Russia, infrastructure would stop if the Russian authorities will do nothing. The last straws were that DHL stopped its work in Russia, Sberbank announced its final withdrawal from Europe, and RosKomNadzor announced its decision to block access to Facebook in Russia. Moreover, after the Meta company allowed publications with death wishes to the Russian and Belarusian presidents on their social platforms, in response to this, Russia also decided to completely block Instagram, and the Deputy Head of the State Duma Committee on Information Policy said that blocking YouTube could also happen soon. There were also rumors that from March 11, a complete disconnection of the Russian Federation from the global network is possible. It was alleged that only servers and websites located in the Russian zone would supposedly work. Thank God, this all remained at the level of rumors, however, Facebook and Instagram no longer work in Russia without a VPN. At this time in the Czech Republic, people began to massively buy iodine in order to protect against radiation in the event of a nuclear attack.

Upon my future return to the Czech Republic, I was also afraid of the aggression towards the Russian people in connection with the situation that had happened. Such a reaction is expected and understandable, but nevertheless it was not clear if such news, which began to appear so often on the network, was inflated and whether there





was anything to fear at all. There were cases when Russians were refused to be served in a cafe, to rent an apartment to people with Russian surnames, or in general calls not to let Russian children go to playgrounds. All this led to the fact that on March 10, the Czech Trade Inspectorate began checking unauthorized sanctions aimed at citizens of Russia and Belarus living in the Czech Republic. The visit of the inspection was waiting for all entrepreneurs and institutions that in their activities in any way discriminated against people on the basis of nationality. Such an offense in Czech law is extremely serious. On this occasion, the head of the Czech Ministry of Internal Affairs, Vít Rakušan, spoke out, who called for the suppression of bullying of citizens of the Russian Federation. Especially when it came to children in schools. The minister said that although the Czech Republic does not issue new visas to Russians, one must understand that the majority of Russian citizens live here precisely because they do not agree with the political situation in their country (iDnes, 2022). The mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib, also spoke categorically negatively, arguing that such actions are unacceptable and unforgivable in the modern world (Twitter, 2022).

As a child, I often asked my mother to read to me, but instead of children's fairy tales those books that she read for herself. It could be philosophical, medical (since she is a doctor by profession) books or biographies of interesting people. One evening I again asked me to read, and this time it turned out to be the memoirs of Count Kokovtsov, the Russian ex-Prime Minister who survived the Russian Revolution at the beginning of the last century. We read the moment where he described his escape from the new totalitarian government. Kokovtsov, who at that time was already 65 years old, had already been arrested several times by the Chekists (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage), and therefore perhaps the next arrest would have been the last. Count and his wife did not take many things with them and left the house at different times so as not to arouse suspicion. In the end, they crossed the Russian-Finnish border on foot through forests and fields at night. Much is erased from memory, but I remember this moment for the rest of my life. I remember how I said to my mother: "Poor old man!", but I could not even imagine that in about twenty years I would have to go through a similar situation.

At the end of March, when the bureaucratic vicissitudes with documents began to come to an end, it was decided to return to Prague as soon as possible, while entire planes were still flying across the Russia, buses were running across its borders, and in the end, while they were still open and I had a valid visa. My usual route to Prague was two planes — from my hometown to Moscow and from Moscow to Prague. Now tickets were bought again to Moscow, but only from there by plane to St. Petersburg, then from St. Petersburg by bus to the capital of Finland — Helsinki, and from there by plane to Prague. In addition to the prepared tickets, there was a financial issue, because at that time I had not yet worked and I needed at least some kind of financial cushion so that I could live on while I was looking for a job. My mother had a euro account opened in a Russian bank and we decided to withdraw cash from there. Due to the latest political situation, we decided to call and find out in advance if it is possible to come. We received a positive response and an appointment. On the agreed day and hour at the bank, they turned us back, saying that we can only withdraw money in

rubles or not at all. In the end, we collected the cash that was at home and that was all I could count on.

The evening before my departure, my mother could no longer contain her emotions and cried a lot. To survive this situation, pressure medications, sedatives no longer helped. We were frightened by the unknown, the complete lack of stability and vague prospects. At 3 am we left for the airport. I did manage to fall asleep a couple of hours before, which helped me get through the next 21 hours on my feet. The sleep helped to put my mind in order after the emotional evening. Previously, flights scared me, but after the last events, it was no longer scary, because all the worst had already happened. During the transfer to St. Petersburg, as it happens, flight attendants distribute drinks and snacks. This time, water and tea were distributed. A passenger from the next row (thanks to the close proximity I heard the conversation) asked the flight attendant why there were no juices, coffee and something else. To which the stewardess replied: "Now there are such times that we should be glad that we have the opportunity to fly somewhere at all."

Upon arrival in St. Petersburg, I was met by a friend, a former classmate from high school. Without her, I most likely would not be able to understand such a huge and dynamic metropolis. I carefully questioned her about the situation and the mood in the city. While we were driving towards my hotel from the side of the airport, we saw several banners on the street and in the subway with symbols forbidden today in the EU. I had fears of walking around the city center, because I had seen and heard many times that the security forces could simply stop, check the phone, read personal chats, and even detain. I saw photos and videos of how in the early days, in all major cities, there were dozens of buses on which protesters were taken away against a special operation. These protests were popularly referred to as "walks", thus in case of checking phones so that there were no obvious indicators of participation in these events, as well as in cases of tracking personal data by keywords. My friend wrote to me several times that "I went for a walk, I hope I will return home" meaning just that. When people began to be caught, they ran to hide in shopping centers or in other people's entrances. Fortunately, I was lucky and I practically did not see the police. Despite the fact, that I have nothing to hide and in general I have always behaved quite cautiously, there was no longer any trust and a sense of security.

The next day I woke up earlier than planned, that is, at 4 am and could not fall asleep again. I rechecked the suitcase, documents and money several times. At 6 am I was already heading towards the bus station. I have heard many times that there have been situations, especially lately, namely bus ticket forgeries. Since all international flights and trains were canceled, the bus remained the only way to leave the country and the entire flow of people went to all the bus stations of the border cities. From St. Petersburg several times a day there are buses to the city of Helsinki, with the final stops of the bus station or airport. I chose the second option so as not to look for transport around the city and immediately head to the airport. As expected, my fears were justified. Due to the huge flow of people who decided to leave Russia, many bought tickets for the same seat on the bus, apparently due to an overload in the booking system. Dozens of people remained at the bus station, and perhaps they lost





money, their planes flew away and the tickets were not returned. It's hard to imagine what they're doing now.

During the entire long trip, we managed to get acquainted with everyone, including the drivers of the bus itself (there were two of them, and they changed periodically). The most active and talkative was the driver named Volodya (Vladimir), who told us immediately to mentally prepare for the check at the Russian border checkpoint. "That's just a check" we thought, because the main thing is to cross the Finnish border and enter to the EU area. This representation was erroneous. When we drove up to our Torfyanovka checkpoint, customs officers stopped us 4 (!) times in total. When the bus was stopped for the first time, two men with machine guns came in and started checking our passports. Basically, they paid attention to foreigners (particularly Ukrainians), took away their passports and left to "check" for about half an hour. In the end, everyone who had their passports taken away, they were returned and we drove on. Less than an hour later, we were stopped again. This time, they checked the reason for leaving. Men in military uniform entered again, and the check of passports, residence permits and visas began anew. With me sat a female journalist who had international confirmations, visas, and a press card. The military officer immediately told her that she would not be released. He said the same thing to many others who were going to leave for work and earnings. Despite the presence of a pasted visa, the main claim was the lack of an agreement with the employer and other papers confirming the availability of a job abroad. This reason is a bit absurd if person already have a visa or a job offer. Many were already on the nerve and did not know what to expect next. As it turned out, this was not the main border check at all, it was just waiting for us ahead. We finally reached the Torfyanovka checkpoint, after which we were told to take all our things and suitcases and go outside. After some time, we were invited to a gray building to the main hall. The next instruction was to put all our things in the center and move as far away as possible. The military came in with dogs and began to check our suitcases in this way, apparently for the transportation of products prohibited by customs, counterfeit, etc. After that we took our things and stood in line for the next check. Now, customs officers were opening our bags and suitcases and rummaging through our belongings. In my case, they probed my clothes and leafed through a textbook on the Czech language and a collection of poems by Bryusov. They also asked how much foreign currency we carry. Having passed this stage, we were sent to stamp the passport and scan visas. I was very lucky, as I passed these stages quickly and soon returned to the bus. But many are far less fortunate. Such people (mostly at the checkpoint of visas and passports) were taken away for so-called "conversations". Most of the people got back on the bus quickly, but for many we waited for about three hours. People were very nervous, because everyone had plane tickets, which were bought at the official time of arrival of the bus in the city. In the end, the most daring passengers from my bus, who apparently had nothing to lose, decided to get together and "beat off" the guys from the customs officers, who were taken away for "conversations". The most amazing thing is that almost everyone returned and we hit the road again. At the border section of Finland, everything went quickly and without complications, except for those people who were not let

through because of an expired PCR test. The question arises: would the COVID-19 test be valid if we arrived a couple of hours earlier?

At the time of arrival in Helsinki, my plane was less than half an hour away. The fact that I managed to catch the plane, I cannot call anything other than a miracle. The next flight to Prague would have been the very next day, which was generally inopportune and also very costly, especially when I would have to save money in the Czech Republic in the near future. When I ran to my gate to the plane, the landing had already begun. Probably, only at the moment when I was sitting in my seat and the pilot announced the takeoff to Prague, I was finally able to breathe calmly. What I had to endure forever imprinted in my memory. I don't think I've ever experienced so much adrenaline in my entire life as I had in these past months. Many of the questions that run through my head every day remain unanswered. When can I return to Russia? When will I see my mother again? When will the special operation end? What will happen next? Even a few months after the incident, practically nothing has changed, so it remains only to believe in the best and in people's humanity.

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