



**Nelly Bekus–Goncharova**

## Living in visa territory

The extent of a person's freedom is determined by the status of their passport. For people who live outside the EU's charmed circle, travelling not only earns them the distrust of the country they wish to leave, but also of the country they wish to enter, writes Nelly Bekus–Goncharova.

Amsterdam is not the first city where I have had to start afresh — exploring the neighbourhood, figuring out the city's most convenient routes and its spatial logic, learning the timetable of its life, discovering its funny quirks, historical anecdotes, and customs. This is like mastering some kind of mundane ritual that still distinguishes European cities from one another. Thanks to these rituals, one can cross more easily over the border of alienation that separates the experience of a city's inhabitant from that of a tourist. At some point in Amsterdam, I really felt my status had changed — perhaps it was when I stopped confusing the names of the canals, or when I became able to explain to tourists who Multatuli was, or when I became converted to the faith that the bicycle is the most convenient form of city transport.

However, there was another demarcation in my Amsterdam experience that could not be erased by familiarisation and that, though imperceptible to many, constituted an inherent part of my life. This border would rise up before me each time I was asked the impossible (from my point of view) question: "What is it that draws you to the city?"

In itself, the question makes sense. However, when addressed to a person who has come to Amsterdam from outside the EU, it can only be asked by somebody who has no idea about the visa policies guarding the borders of the new Europe. The question overlooks the fact that the only way a non–EU passport holder may cross the border into the EU is to obtain an official invitation. This document must clearly detail the purpose of your visit, its duration, and the precise date of departure, as well as charge the inviting side with complete financial responsibility. As the unlucky bearer of a non–EU passport, you are assigned the humble role of "guest" and this is as far as your rights extend. You cannot initiate your trip or claim responsibility for your stay. That is why it is meaningless to ask why a non–EU citizen has chosen one country and not another: having crossed the border, almost nothing that happens to you actually depends on you.

Behind this visa policy there stands a strict border philosophy, but this border extends not so much between states as between people. It accentuates the difference between those with the right to free choice and those without; those who can decide what city to live in and those who cannot. Right from the start, my Amsterdam experience has been linked to the passive role I play in this

new act of my own life. No matter how much time I spend here, my life in this city has been and still is that of a person stranded on the other side of the border. I am a person who never travels further than the visa territory.

## Visa history

Citizens of western European countries have their own credit histories. Those living outside the limits of the EU have visa histories. In both cases, it is about trust. In the former case a person is given money for temporary use, in the second case the temporary right to travel. With loans it is expected that the money will return, with visas the actual person. However, while a loan may improve a person's material wellbeing, a visa, upon expiry, always returns them to square one. "Freedom" becomes reduced to the possibility of obtaining another invitation.

Visas first came to my attention eight years ago when planning a trip from Belarus to Bulgaria on an invitation from a university. It seemed such an easy thing to do: check if there were trains going in that direction, choose the most convenient one, and book a ticket. At least that was what I thought. It was the mid-1990s: the Iron Curtain had fallen, countries had ceased to be ideological opponents, and, I believed, had become able to treat people crossing their borders in a friendlier way. That illusion evaporated quickly when the complex visa cartography of eastern Europe unfolded before me. Apart from a visa for Bulgaria itself, it turned out I needed a multitude of transit visas. Surprising was not their existence *per se*, but the fact that getting them was no mere formality. It took an enormous amount of time, paperwork, and money, not to mention thoughts about my own status on earth.

That was just the beginning of my visa history — I was yet to be surprised by the diversity of illogical rules of consular agencies. The Romanian consulate was the most expensive and least complex: my transit visa was issued in 10 minutes with no extra papers for a charge of 45 dollars (over half a monthly wage in Belarus at the time). The Czech embassy contented itself with half that amount but took a week to provide the desired stamp. I was told it was possible to speed up the process if I had the death certificate of a relative; luckily, all mine were still alive. As for the Schengen visa, in theory it was free yet in practice it was practically impossible to obtain.

One by one, I computed all the ways to cross eastern Europe from north to south from the point of view of the bearer of a Belarusian transit visa. Whimsical itineraries fell apart like a house of cards due to the need to obtain three, four, even five transit visas. To collect them would have taken between two weeks to a month, even though I only planned to stay in Bulgaria for a few days.

That was how I came to understand that visas are not merely formal stamps in a passport: they are a special field of human life, and exert a powerful influence over it. They are an elaborate obstacle course that separates the desire (or need) to go somewhere from the possibility (or right) to do so.



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## Visa guilt

Years have passed since then, spent almost entirely outside Belarus, in Poland, Austria, Holland and the US. One is bound to think about the problems of grafting oneself onto the new environment, about breaking cultural barriers, growing familiar with another country and language, and learning the new specifics of everyday life. I recall above all the "inner workings" of my life abroad: the number and diversity of visas and residence permits issued to me during that time. All those entry, transit, three-month, one year, return, business, double- and multiple-entry visas. I recall the events and procedures that accompanied all those stamps I was accumulating in my passport, the time wasted on filling out forms, queuing in consulates, collecting the necessary references; weeks and sometimes months of wearisome uncertainty. Then there was the subliminal feeling of guilt about my vagabond spirit, as if my intention to cross the borders of my homeland was suspicious in itself.

I get this vague guilt feeling every time I appear before a functionary of a consulate or immigration office. I back up my answers to their questions with countless documents. Every such meeting is pregnant with the suggestion that you are a violator — if not of borders, then of some intuitive notion of normal human life.

In the Middle Ages, a wanderer or person unattached to one place was as normal. Jacques Le Goff has described such chaotic migration along the roads of Europe:

On the roads, knights and peasants would meet clerics who were either on a journey prescribed by the rules, or who had severed their connections with their monasteries [...] They would meet students travelling to renowned schools and universities (was it not said in a twelfth century poem that exile, the *terra aliena*, is the lot of the scholar?), as well as pilgrims and all kinds of vagabonds. The Middle Ages, the epoch of travels on foot and horseback, came to an end after the fourteenth century, when travellers became tramps, or accursed people.

People began to value their lives according to standards of the place in which they lived. Exceptions to this rule, such as merchants or missionaries, only emphasised the norm of a settled life. Today, the norm remains in effect. The right of EU citizens to unhindered, visa-free travel throughout Europe is another kind of exception. Not only does it fail to change the norm, but it reinforces it, adding new importance to the connection between a person and his or her abode. That place has now become an additional indicator of one's economic and political status. The country that issues your passport, its image,

and its international geopolitical status now determines the extent of your freedom, your right to travel, and the number of visas in your passport.

Europeans' exemption from the need for visas has only strengthened the rigid norm of individual existence — that of possessing one's own place on earth.

### **"You belong wherever you were born"**

There is a Russian proverb that goes: "You belong wherever you were born." As an insinuation—cum—motto it would fit in well inside any consular department, or at least those to be found in Belarus. It seems as though it is the principle that guides the officials who decide whether to issue a visa. It is as if that is what affects their final decisions, not the mind—boggling combinations of documents required from the visa applicant: invitations, tickets, insurance policies, income references, medical certificates, records on relatives at home and abroad, birth certificates, marriage certificates, a clear criminal record, proof of HIV and TB negativity. Mind you, having all those documents does not guarantee you a visa. People who apply for visas on a regular basis know that there is nothing rational or automatic about the seemingly well-oiled machinery of visa issue.

Once I was denied a Czech transit visa needed for a trip to Austria. I already had an Austrian visa in my passport, along with tickets that proved that my intention was to spend no more than two or three hours in the Czech Republic (as long as it takes the Minsk–Vienna train to pass through the country). It all looked so formal and simple that at first I could not believe in the possibility of refusal. I still think that the female officer's motivations lay not in bureaucratic rationale, politics, or economics, but instead in the "culture of disapproval" that descends upon everyone wishing to venture outside one's own country. It was an unexpected flash of the subconscious norm that says that there is no reason for one to travel at all — "You belong wherever you were born."

### **Paradoxes on the Belarusian border**

"Why do you want to study abroad and write dissertations? There are already enough academics in Belarus", a Belarusian border guard once replied angrily to my explanation as to the purpose of my visit to Poland. His "opinion" remained just that, however, and I crossed the border that time. Had the same conversation taken place today, the result would be different: the Belarus courts have recently passed a law under which any student leaving Belarus to study must have a special permit from the ministry of education. Moreover, travel agencies are now obliged to inform the security services about people buying tours abroad. The ways of Belarus are original indeed. For example, Belarusians are required to obtain a special stamp in order to *leave* the country, a sort of exit visa, although the authorities go no further than intimidating those who have already left.

Yet freedom of movement for Belarusians has been limited with minimal effort on the part of the Belarusian authorities. Leaving Belarus is relatively easy in comparison to obtaining a visa to enter another country. The world has been closed to Belarusians not by their far—from—democratic regime but by those very countries where human rights and the freedom of the individual are declaredly at the top of the hierarchy of cultural values.

This is a paradox commonly experienced by inhabitants of united Europe's border zone. It leads one to contemplate not just the political instrumentality of

a border, but also its status as the incorporation of the political interpretation of human value. It turns out that this interpretation is directly dependent on one's passport.

### **Miscellaneous stories**

The German embassy in Belarus only takes applications for a few hours each day. In order to be seen, people have to queue for days, sleeping overnight in their cars parked nearby. Obtaining the visa sometimes takes longer than the journey itself (if of course one gets a visa).

A Ukrainian colleague of mine, invited by an Austrian institute for a two-week research visit, had her programme "reduced" to just three days by a consular worker on the pretext that "it would be sufficient for the purposes of her research".

A visit to the American consulate in Amsterdam begins with an almost Orwellian scene. Before entering the territory of the consulate, you undergo an interrogation conducted via a hidden video camera. You have to stand still, facing a box on the fence, and give detailed answers to questions coming through an invisible loudspeaker. The questions concern not only formalities, but also private aspects of your life not conventionally disclosed to members of the general public. Anyway, there is no choice here: the box receives its answers from people embarrassed by the presence of others, who, in turn, will soon have to expose details about their own lives.

Securing my Dutch residence permit took me exactly 12 months — the same period I was going to be living here. For the first six months, I awaited permission to cross the border and enter the country and for the next six, a document that would permit me to remain here. Meanwhile, whether we like it or not, the waiting renders our life semi-genuine: whatever we do or plan is left hanging in the air. Surely nothing like this could happen to people living in their own country; it is a fate reserved exclusively for those who have decided to go somewhere.

### **Visa territory**

The desire to enter another country deprives you, in some obscure way, of your status as a normal person; you end up in a place where other laws are in effect. It is a special visa territory where you are under the pressure of a double authority: from the country you are leaving and the one you are entering. In the meantime, neither recognises that you have any rights.

Essentially, the concept of a "border zone" not only means a strip of land along a national border. It is also the place one finds oneself when requesting a visa. Unwillingly, one enters a state of latent conflict with the authorities on both sides of the border one intends to cross. That moment is the supposed beginning of one's symbolic liberation from the territory that includes one's regulated "place on earth". Along with this, one loses the presumption of innocence that, to a certain extent, guarantees one's rights and liberties, or rather guarantees them as long as one stays home.

In visa territory, a person is suspicious exactly because of their wish to abandon their "place", at least for a while. By approaching a consulate for a visa, we effectively declare this desire, or rather this is how the authorities would seem to see it. They are authorities that, due to their very nature,

exercise control over people's lives, irrespective of political systems and nationalities. This is why our intention to cross a border instantly triggers mechanisms inside the repressive, controlling machinery, which suddenly "forgets" its liberal values. We end up playing a new part: that of an object of suspicion of a power for whom the idea of individual freedom no longer exists, nor our right to be where we need to be.

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