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‘Almost Nothing Had Changed’: Anti-War Russians Risk First Trips Home Since Invasion

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View of the Moscow Kremlin. **Alexander Nemenov / AFP**

When animation artist Varvara returned to Russia earlier this year for the first time since fleeing abroad after the Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the main emotion she felt was surprise.

Not by how much had changed in her homeland after over a year of war — but by how little.

“If you read the news, you get the impression that there is terrible lawlessness all over Russia,” the 25-year-old told The Moscow Times.

“But when you come back, everything looks the same... When I walked into my parents' apartment, I felt like I had only been gone for a week. Everything was familiar; almost nothing had changed.”

The invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s “partial” mobilization seven months later prompted

hundreds of thousands of people, mostly those opposed to the war, to flee abroad.

Many left in a hurry, bringing only that which they could fit into a few suitcases.

However, amid a pause in mobilization and no decisive changes on the battlefield, many have taken quick trips home — and have been surprised by what they found.

For some, the reasons for going back were bureaucratic: to apply for a new passport or to sell real estate. Others wanted to visit relatives and friends.

All those who spoke to The Moscow Times about returning for the first time since the invasion requested anonymity for security reasons.

After witnessing the country's crackdown on opposition activists and independent journalism — and the prosecution of hundreds of people who do not support the war or President Vladimir Putin — many emigres expect to encounter a dystopia when they arrive in Russia.

The reality is more banal.

"It's corny, but the first thing that caught my eye after returning was that Twitter and Instagram don't work without a VPN," said Yulia, referring to Russia's wartime ban on several foreign social media sites.

"Moscow bars were packed with visitors even on Monday evenings," added the 25-year-old screenwriter who returned in April after fleeing to Georgia last year.

"Recently, my friend and I went out for a glass of wine. All the tables were occupied."

For anti-war Russians returning home, the first hurdle is getting across the Russian border. Many said they deleted apps, chat histories and photos from their electronic devices that could reveal their opposition to what the Kremlin calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine.

Some reported being stopped and questioned by border guards.

"I was summoned for an hour-and-a-half-long interrogation after a border guard saw that Ukraine was the place of birth in my passport," said Maria, a 22-year old IT specialist from St. Petersburg.

"I was completely unprepared," she told The Moscow Times.

"His first question was: 'How do you feel about the special military operation?' I said I didn't want to discuss it. Then the FSB officer replied, like an action hero: 'You have to, Maria'."

Having fled to Georgia in March 2022 after the start of the invasion, Maria was returning to Russia to pick up documents.

"I felt very much in danger. I tried to answer non-committedly. All the time, I was spoken to as if I was some sort of recidivist criminal," she said.

After border guards looked through her phone, she was released.

“I got off lightly, but this reminded me that ordinary people in Russia have no protection,” she said.

But many of those returning are not stopped at the border, the unpredictability adding to feelings of apprehension that many feel on arriving back in Russia.

Varvara, the animation artist who flew to Moscow from Armenia, was worried she could be interrogated because she spent two weeks in jail before leaving Russia for tweeting about an anti-war rally.

“Everything went smoothly at border control — although I was very worried, they didn't ask me many questions,” she said.

While Russia has refrained from imposing legal restrictions on anti-war emigrants, they have been criticized as “traitors” by top officials and lawmakers have discussed the possibility of financial penalties.

Once inside Russia, returnees said they noticed few signs of slipping living standards or economic problems linked to Western sanctions — although the absence of once-common Western brands that left in the wake of the invasion was obvious.

Instead of Coca-Cola, Russian supermarkets now stock “Dobry Cola” and “CoolCola,” while McDonald's has been bought out and re-branded as Vkusno-i Tochka (Tasty – Period) and fried chicken giant KFC is now marketed as Rostic’s.

Perhaps the biggest surprise for emigres is to discover that friends and acquaintances who stayed in Russia are preoccupied with everyday problems — and uninterested in the progress of the fighting in Ukraine.

“The biggest shock I experienced was that no one appeared to know about the war. In St. Petersburg, the first city I visited, people seemed to be even more fashionable and more European in the way they dress,” said Viktoriya, 24, who emigrated to Austria before the invasion and returned to Russia earlier this month.

The lack of overt interest may be linked to Russia’s draconian wartime censorship laws introduced last year which make any public criticism of the invasion a crime.

There has also been a rise in the number of denunciations of those believed to harbor pro-Ukraine or anti-war views.

In addition, the Kremlin has worked to maintain an air of normalcy by playing down the significance of attacks inside Russia, not releasing casualty figures and keeping daily reminders of the war on the streets to a minimum.

Outside of Russia’s biggest cities, however, the war can appear much closer.

In her hometown of Voronezh, near the border with Ukraine, Viktoriya said that it was impossible to ignore the ongoing conflict.

“On my first day there, I heard the sound of a drone and noticed the many advertisements

recruiting for the army. There were posters in buses, in supermarkets and even in bookstores," said the graduate student.

"It seemed like no one was paying attention to it all. Although my parents said that, in fact, people are very worried."

Despite the atmosphere of normalcy, returnees said that the longer they stayed in Russia the more reminders of the war they encountered.

"I began to notice that Moscow was filled with all kind of terrifying images you don't expect," said Yulia.

"It still remains an expensive, high-tech megapolis but there are huge, ominous billboards with Z-symbols on the streets, ads for urgent sales of apartments with big discounts and you constantly feel that CCTV cameras are watching you."

Visits to familiar places often provoked conflicting feelings.

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"When looking at people, I realized I was constantly trying to assess whether they supported the war or not. I was sitting at the dentist's and wondering what he thought about it all and I was buying cigarettes and trying to guess what the cashier thought about Putin," said Varvara, who returned to her new home in the Armenian capital of Yerevan after a few weeks in the Russian capital.

"Maybe they are trying not to remember that this war is going on. But I can't forget about it," she added.

Interrogation at the border made IT specialist Maria regret her decision to return to Russia — even for a brief visit.

"Now I think it was a bad idea. I'm not going to come to Russia anymore while Vladimir Putin is in power," she said.

One of the last things Maria saw in St. Petersburg before heading to the airport to catch her flight out of Russia was a police van by the metro station.

"It was ready to detain protesters," she said. "The only question was — who?"

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