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The Trump Administration Deported a Military Deserter Back to Russia. Then He Escaped Again.

By Brawley Benson

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Artyom Vovchenko in a jiu-jitsu uniform. **nemoskva.net**

Crossing the border into Belarus, with Russia in the rearview mirror behind him, Artyom Vovchenko breathed a sigh of relief. He knew, in all likelihood, he would finally be free.

It had been a long journey. After deserting from the Russian military in 2022, Vovchenko, now 27, stepped into a life of uncertainty, attempting and failing to secure political asylum in the U.S. Last summer, he was deported back to Russia, where he faced imprisonment or being sent to fight in Ukraine.

The U.S. has deported scores of Russians back home as part of a widening immigration crackdown under the second Trump administration, but few are known to have replicated what Vovchenko did next: he escaped for a second time.

“In the SVO, those with a charge like mine, they’re sent into assaults, 70% survive,” Vovchenko said, using the abbreviation for the Kremlin’s term for the war. “I knew I had to do something.”

Vovchenko recently gave two interviews to The Moscow Times recounting his improbable and highly risky flight from Russia earlier this year.

This story is based on his recollections, as well as documentation that he shared about certain aspects of his experience. Some parts of his account were not able to be verified.

For a deserter, being on the run is dangerous. Russia mandates strict punishment for the act, which carries a prison sentence of up to 10 years, and has been known to aggressively lobby for deserters in other countries to be extradited so they can stand trial.

Vovchenko’s exploit sheds light on the depths of some would-be combatants’ desperation to escape the war machine at a time when countries are showing increased willingness to send them back to Russia.

Citing continued threats to his security, Vovchenko declined to share his current location with The Moscow Times, saying only that he is in a country where he is trying to start a new life and looking forward to better times.

In the system

It was the prospect of finding a permanent place of safety that brought Vovchenko from Indonesia, where he’d been living and working as a mixed martial arts coach, to the U.S. in the summer of 2024, about two years after he deserted from the Russian military.

Like any other asylum seeker, he was integrated into the sprawling U.S. immigration apparatus. In recent years, this has increasingly meant spending time in detention centers. Over the course of the next 13 months, he rotated through different detention centers while his asylum application case worked its way through the courts.

All of this was a far cry from what he was used to. Originally from the city of Zelenokumsk in southern Russia’s Stavropol region, Vovchenko only joined the military because he had to. He studied law at a university in the city of Saratov, attended rallies in support of the late opposition figure Alexei Navalny, maintained an affinity for beekeeping and practiced jiu-jitsu.

“I didn’t really understand politics, I just understood that something was wrong and we were going in the wrong direction,” he said of his formative years in school, when he started to become politically conscious.

Every able-bodied Russian man must complete compulsory military service, and Vovchenko began his in 2020. In 2022, after an episode in which he claimed his service was prolonged without his knowledge, he deserted during the early days of the full-scale invasion.

Now, after a brief period of freedom, he was essentially a prisoner.

Vovchenko said although the conditions of his detention in the U.S. were “bad,” he was still

treated "humanely." He spent some of his time working in the kitchen and trying to learn English with the help of a grammar book ordered for him by a friend.

One day, while lifting a large container of liquid, he suddenly felt pain in his back. According to a medical report from a Moscow clinic dated Oct. 13, 2025, and shared with The Moscow Times, Vovchenko had suffered a herniated disc, when soft tissue pushes out between the bones of the spine.

It's an injury he's still struggling to recover from today — a reminder of his time in detention and the past he's trying to put behind him.

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Vovchenko was in detention when Donald Trump was elected president on a platform that promised to ramp up deportations of undocumented immigrants. Rights advocates had already been noticing a hardening of the immigration system under President Joe Biden, with Russians being sent to detention centers with greater frequency. There, they faced prolonged detention and the possibility of being deported back to Russia.

This was a dangerous proposition. Many Russians seeking asylum face persecution from the Kremlin for past activism or political work. Being deported back to Russia could represent an immense threat to their human rights, activists say.

An in-depth story written about Vovchenko's case by The New York Times last fall shed light on aspects of his imprisonment and deportation. Among them, it was reported that Vovchenko tried to make a case for asylum based on his objection to the war in Ukraine.

Vovchenko's claim was denied. The case was decided by a judge who denied 89% of asylum claims between 2019 and 2024, above the national average.

The White House did not respond to an emailed request for comment. In a statement, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security said Vovchenko had entered the U.S. illegally and "received full due process."

A daring escape

In August 2025, Vovchenko arrived in Moscow on a flight from the U.S. that had made a stopover in Cairo.

The day hadn't gone well. Before leaving, he'd heard stories of other at-risk Russians who had managed to avoid being sent home by escaping from the airport during their deportation flight's layover. This would be his chance, he thought, if he could make it happen.

Instead, Vovchenko ended up getting into a struggle with security guards after dawdling in a bathroom while the plane was boarding, hoping that he would be able to avoid getting on the flight. He said the guards eventually restrained him, put zip ties on his wrists and loaded him onto the plane.

“I resisted for five to 10 minutes,” he said. “In the end, I couldn’t [continue]. I had no strength. And there were a lot of people. One person even came with a weapon. He started poking me with it and he threatened to shoot me.”

Vovchenko said he has trouble remembering exactly what he thought about on that flight because he was experiencing so much psychological distress.

“I was already in a state of despair, I guess,” he said. “I didn’t even realize where I was. I felt as if I wasn’t in my own body.”

Related article: Russians Claiming U.S. Asylum Face Prolonged Detention and Uncertainty

If the border officers at the Moscow airport weren’t already aware that a deserter was being sent back, then they clocked it immediately when they ran his documents. Vovchenko was questioned and then handed over to military police, who put him in a detention center to await his trial.

For his initial months back in Russia, he was “just recovering psychologically” and trying to heal his back, an injury which had gotten so severe that he had trouble getting out of bed. Luckily, he wouldn’t be imprisoned or sent to Ukraine until this medical condition was cleared by a doctor, he said.

Even in Russia, Vovchenko still held the urge to flee, but how to pull off something that audacious was a daunting question. When his back injury started improving a few months later, it looked like the window of opportunity was starting to close. It was time to act.

Ironically, the injury he sustained in the U.S. would become his lifeline. Vovchenko was able to see a civilian doctor for his treatments and planned to use this to escape. He’d connected with an NGO that helps at-risk individuals do just that and got his plan in order for the big day. (The Moscow Times is withholding the organization’s name because it operates covertly in Russia.)

One February morning, when he had an appointment, Vovchenko slipped out of the clinic. It was important to do this during an early appointment, he said, when the escort wasn’t usually “particularly strict” and he would have more time to travel the long distance ahead of him.

The night before, his nerves had kept him awake. “I lay on my bed and waited for the time, going over everything in my head, how to do everything,” he said. He needed to make it to Minsk, where he could take a flight out of Belarus, but at any number of points along the way the whole plan could come crashing down.

It almost did right at the beginning. After leaving the clinic — he’d simply walked through the entrance and right out a different exit — he took a taxi to a station in Moscow where he could get a minibus to Minsk. But when he arrived, he realized he was too late: the bus had left 10 minutes ago, and the next one wasn’t until the evening.

“I panicked and I got really scared, because I’d already made up my mind,” he said.

Nearby taxi drivers were charging more than Vovchenko could afford, but after some

pleading, one of them offered to take him to a gas station outside the city, right on the highway leading to Belarus, where he might be able to hitch a ride the rest of the way.

At the gas station, he said he spent two hours trying to find someone willing to give him a ride, telling drivers that he needed to go to Minsk for medical treatment.

Finally, a truck driver taking jackets purchased in Moscow to resell in Belarus offered to give him a lift for a few thousand rubles. The driver was bound for Brest, a Belarusian city on the Polish border, and their route would go right by the airport in Minsk.

Then, there was one last major hurdle: crossing the Russian border. If Vovchenko was going to get caught, this was the most likely spot, a place where guards would have to check his documents. Somehow, nobody up to this point had taken Vovchenko's passport, a small miracle that made the whole ordeal possible.

He said he was on edge the whole time, from when officers checked the vehicle's trailer to, especially, when they looked over his own passport. Vovchenko waited nervously for the officer's reaction.

"Okay," the officer said, handing the documents back. They were let through.

"It was simply an unreal feeling," he said of his emotions after leaving Russia. "Because after prison and after all that, for me, it was the first breath of fresh air, the feeling that somehow life could change for the better."

Right after crossing the border, Vovchenko took out his phone and wrote to one of the NGOs that had been helping him. Staying in Belarus, a country that maintains an extradition agreement with Russia, would be incredibly risky, so they agreed to help him buy a ticket to a different country. He arrived at the airport that evening, getting a few hours of rest before his flight the next day.

Vovchenko shared with The Moscow Times emails that he sent to the NGO in the lead-up to his flight that show his rising elation as he realizes his plan had succeeded:

"I went through border control, they didn't really ask any questions."

"Got on the plane."

"Hurray! Everything is fine, thank God. Thank you very much!"

'If God helps me, then it was meant to be'

Months later, Vovchenko said he relishes his freedom but still feels like he's in legal "limbo." After what he's gone through, he experiences a great deal of everyday stress.

He spends his time these days trying to improve his skills with artificial intelligence programs and doing a bit of work with them on the side, practicing English on Duolingo and waiting for news on his efforts to find a permanent place to live.

Vovchenko is receiving assistance from a U.S.-based organization, Russian America for

Democracy in Russia, which recently organized an initiative they're hoping garners some interest: a fundraiser to help pay for treatment for his persistent back injuries and legal support.

A deeply religious person, Vovchenko said that he often drew on his faith as a source of strength during his ordeal.

"I thought, well, if I try, if God helps me, then it was meant to be," he said. "If I don't try, nothing will change."

As for his unsuppressed optimism, he credits that to his late mother, who once told him: "Live your life, don't be afraid of anything, do what you want."

"Honestly, after everything that's happened to me, I've come to feel a sense of joy just at being alive and healthy," he said. "No matter what happens, whether it's everyday stuff or problems I'm facing, I think to myself, 'Who cares about those problems? I was in prison. I almost died. I was almost sent to the SVO'."

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