**A temporary protected scientist by Mykyta Peregrym**

I woke up in my parents' apartment early in the morning on January 31, 2022. Bath, breakfast, quick preparations, mom's and dad's hugs, and I am already in a taxi to Zhuliany airport, from where I had to fly to Bratislava. Only the most needed things for casual life, hiking and running were in my suitcase, because I planned to come back in two months at least for a weekend. As well, I had my laptop, documents, souvenirs, and mom's sandwiches in my backpack. The airport was sleepy as usual at this time, not many people, staff did their work slowly, but confident. Duty free shops were almost empty. However, my state was another: I was excited, worried, inspired, depressed at the same time. Such a combination of feelings is not normal for the majority of people, except Ukrainian scientists who constantly live and work in unpredicted economic and political conditions: The Orange Revolution in 2004, Euromaidan in 2013, the Russian aggression in 2014, global crises and pandemics.

My seat was located near the aisle. Though I like to look out the window, I have never paid additional for this service in low cost airlines. Honestly, this did not upset me this time, since thick clouds covered the surface of the earth. Nothing was visible. But, I would be glad now if everything happened in a different way, because as it turned out my plane did one of the last flights from Ukraine, as well as it was my last chance to look at least somehow at peaceful Kyiv.

I was flying to Slovakia, because I was granted a ten-month scholarship in Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica within the National Programme of the Slovak Republic. I was going to carry out some botanical and ecological investigations with my colleagues who hosted me there. I considered this opportunity as a new chance to return to the European Union to live and work in normal and stable conditions with an acceptable salary. It looked like a revanche for me personally after the COVID-19 pandemic, when I had to return to Ukraine after a successful postdoc of the duration of almost three years in Hungary. My leadership from Eszterházy Károly University had already started the discussion about my future job contract in the beginning of 2020, but a financial crisis connected with the pandemic changed their and my plans. Therefore, I was too motivated on my airplane to show my best professional qualities to Slovak colleagues and ask about the possibility of getting a job in their country. Also, I dreamed of visiting Slovak Tatras and enjoying their diversity of plants and landscapes. I heard and read a lot about these areas, so I was going to find many endemic and rare species to expand my understanding of the flora of the Carpathian Mountains as well as about ecological peculiarities of some species.

As a contrast to my positive feelings and desires was the anxiety that permanently kept me chained. The latest news on the Internet, statements by NATO and the American leadership said that a large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine was about to begin. But, the phrase about May shashlycks ("barbecue") in a recent speech by the Ukrainian president[[1]](#footnote-1), when he was trying to calm the people, did not leave my head. The carelessness and lies of the country's leadership simply infuriated me, especially after my trip to Lugansk region. I went there in the middle of the month because I have been working, mostly remotely, for Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University located in Starobilsk[[2]](#footnote-2) at that time. The main aim of my visit was the development of herbarium collection of the University, as my Faculty agreed with Luhansk Nature Reserve to take their collection for its preservation, because of constant shellings of Stanytsia Luhanska during winter 2021/2022 where its central office was located. On the one hand, I saw how good roads and bridges were being built according to the state program of our president, in the region that has a common border with Russia and a battle line of demarcation with the fake Lugansk People's Republic. On the other hand, as soon as our car with the herbarium collection arrived at the university, a woman from the Reserve called me and said that immediately after our departure heavy shelling began, and even one house was completely destroyed along the road along which we were driving. These facts have me stumped, especially considering that I did not see any fortifications along the mentioned roads. I could not explain to myself everything that was happening, because I understood that it was very likely that Russian tanks could go along these new roads soon...

In short, this is how I arrived in Slovakia with a set of contradictory feelings and thoughts. Also, to be honest, I clearly understood that to some extent I was escaping from a country where a catastrophe was very likely to begin soon. The last thought gave rise to a feeling of guilt, but science has always been my passion and the most important activity in life, so I decided to trust fate, since no one knew exactly what would happen after.

However, I had a wonderful and fruitful three and half weeks after my arrival to Banska Bystrica. I talked a lot with my colleagues, we discussed our research and built plans for our field season. I immersed myself in the comfortable atmosphere of Central European science again, and did my first hikings to the tops of mountains surrounding my city. Though many of them were covered by snow, I enjoyed everything that I saw. But, many things changed early in the morning on February 24, 2022 when the Russian Federation started the large-scale invasion in Ukraine together with powerful shelling of large cities of Ukraine. I was woken up by my sister's call from the USA who informed me that a new wave of the war that we have experienced since 2014 and which deprived us of our native Lugansk, has just begun... It was absolutely scary. I constantly scrolled and scrolled news to try to understand what really is happening. I was too worried about my family, friends, colleagues, and it is strange to say, but about the university's herbarium collection in Starobilsk too. Fortunately, all close people stayed safe at that time, but Starobilsk was occupied in the first days of March 2022. When the shock and numbness began to wear off, I began to think how and who I could help. I was also haunted by the question of whether I should return to Ukraine to go to war.

Honestly, my scientific work totally stopped for three months, because I was not able to concentrate on my ideas. My mind was totally busy by the ongoing war at day and at night. It is complicated to imagine, but I was at the war even during my dreams. Fortunately, I started doing a lot of useful things for my friends and colleagues that impacted positively on my mental state. I helped several people to move to Europe using my personal contacts: I found jobs and housing some of them in Switzerland; I advised others on possible routes of movement and opportunities for Ukrainian refugees; I helped transfer humanitarian aid and military equipment from Slovakia to Ukraine; I posted all possible useful information in my social networks; and I donated, donated, and donated. Remembering those days, I am very grateful to my Slovak colleagues, who understood my state and supported me with all their might. Without their help, it would have been much more difficult for me to survive that time.

Also, a legal dilemma arose for me at that time, since my 90 days of visa-free travel in the Schengen area was ending and I needed to obtain a basis for my further stay in Slovakia. Visa documents were not accepted, since all relevant departments were busy receiving and registering Ukrainian refugees. In addition, I had lost complete contact with my university by that time, because, as I wrote above, Starobelsk was quickly occupied. Actually, the only available option remained for me: to obtain a temporary protected status. After long and hard thought, I decided that my son, who lives in Sweden since 2018, and my science are the main priorities in my life, so I will not return to Ukraine and will try to arrange my new life in Europe, although I was going to continue to do everything in my power for my friends and colleagues in Ukraine. Thus, I became a temporary protected scientists since March 23, 2022.

If I talk exclusively about work and living conditions during my scholarship in Slovakia, everything was very fine. Moreover, I was able to concentrate on my work in summer 2022 again and prepared a few manuscripts as well as to start new ones. However, I had to be a realist, because this Slovak scholarship had to end on November 30, 2022. Therefore, the question "What will I do next?" looked absolutely logical. Fortunately, many scholarships and support programs for Ukrainian scientists appeared at that time, but possibilities regarding Slovakia were unclear and foggy. Also, as a variant, my Slovak supervisor in Banska Bystrica offered to become her PhD student for the next four years. The last idea was not suitable for me, because I considered starting a new PhD study having a PhD degree and almost 20-year research experience as a strange thing. As well, I wanted to have a stable or at least a prospective way for the development of my research career in new conditions. But it is not for nothing that they say: “Who seeks will always find!” Therefore, when I was searching for something for my future, I found the announcement about six-month special scholarships for Ukrainian researchers within the Biodiverse Anthropocenes Research Programme[[3]](#footnote-3) in the University of Oulu. It was exactly what I needed.

Except that this programme was thematically very suitable for me, it is funny to say but other wishes from my previous life coincided in this choice. When I was isolated in the COVID time in Hungary, I watched a lot of movies that are not typically for me. One of them was "Diva of Finland"[[4]](#footnote-4). After watching it, I first learned about the existence of the city of Oulu, and I dreamed of visiting it once to experience a polar night and Aurora Borealis, because I studied the impact of artificial light at night on biodiversity and ecosystems at that time. Finally, I landed in the airport of Oulu on December 1, 2022, because I was granted the mentioned scholarship.

My Finnish life began with lost luggage, which fortunately returned to me the next day. Actually, those two suitcases contained almost my entire life at that time. But, it was the single bad impression, other things beginning from real winter and my rented studio, and finishing by university possibilities and environment, looked like I am in a fairy tale. I made two presentations about my previous research here, published two articles as well as I widely extended my research network during the first six months. However, the familiar question "What will I do next?" appeared again.

I was lucky, because Finnish colleagues paid attention to my activity, ideas and successes. My scholarship was extended twice for six and three months. Of course, I tried to find another opportunity to continue my research in Finland. I applied for grants and open positions, but, unfortunately, all my attachments stayed without results. However, two prospective variants in Brussels (Belgium) and Edmonton (Canada) raised on my horizon. I thought a lot if I should accept one of them, but I fell in love with Finland, with its nature, in the end, according to my feelings, I found a second home for myself here. Moreover, a small informal diaspora of Ukrainian scientists has formed at the university, which allowed us to support each other professionally and mentally. I did not want to change the country again, therefore I continued to look for something in Finland, because my colleagues from the University of Oulu said that they do not have possibilities to support me more.

Fortunately, I was lucky again, because due to help of my supervisor in Oulu I prepared a grant application which has been supported by the Academy of Finland. So, I have recently started a two-year study in citizen science in biodiversity in the University of Oulu. I would be lying if I did not say that my perception of life in Finland has not changed. On the one hand, confidence and stability began to return to my life, but on the other hand, those things that brought me to Oulu (polar night, northern lights, real winter) turned from temporary entertainment into everyday life. This provoked the emergence of many unanswered questions: “Will I spend my whole life here?”, “Will I see my native Ukrainian steppes again?”, “When I die, will I be buried somewhere here in the forest among the stones, or will my grave be somewhere close to my ancestors, where it is very hot in the summer, dark nights and the whole sky is filled with stars?”, and many many others...

Also, I constantly think about my professional development, because I know for sure that two years will pass very quickly and I will have to look for a job again. Frankly, now I am not very competitive in the Finnish education and science system without special support. I do not feel like my rich Eastern and Central European experience is viewed as valuable here. This is not because I am stupid, but because most of my career was spent in countries with different requirements and approaches. Therefore, I view the next two years as a chance to adapt to new conditions and fully get involved in the game, realizing my professional desires and achieving my goals. Of course, any advice, support, help and consultations are very welcome in my situation.

In conclusion, I want to say that I do not know when and how the war in Ukraine will end. I do not know if I can gain a foothold in Finland as a scientist. I do not know if I will be able to return to Ukraine after the war, and how Ukrainian society will perceive me: will I be a person who has not given up my calling, or will I be a traitor in their eyes, despite all my contribution and support from abroad. But I know for sure that I will do my best to maintain my passion for understanding nature, creating new knowledge and new scientific discoveries, and also so as not to lose myself and my loved ones in this terrible whirlpool of unpredictable events.

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1. January 19, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSMMlF9vptg> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The university is my alma mater with a complicated fortune, because it had to evacuate from Luhansk to Starobilsk in 2014 after the first stage of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and this education and research center has been hosted in three cities of Poltava region since 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.oulu.fi/en/research/biodiverse-arctic-and-global-resilience/biodiverse-anthropocenes [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diva\_of\_Finland [↑](#footnote-ref-4)